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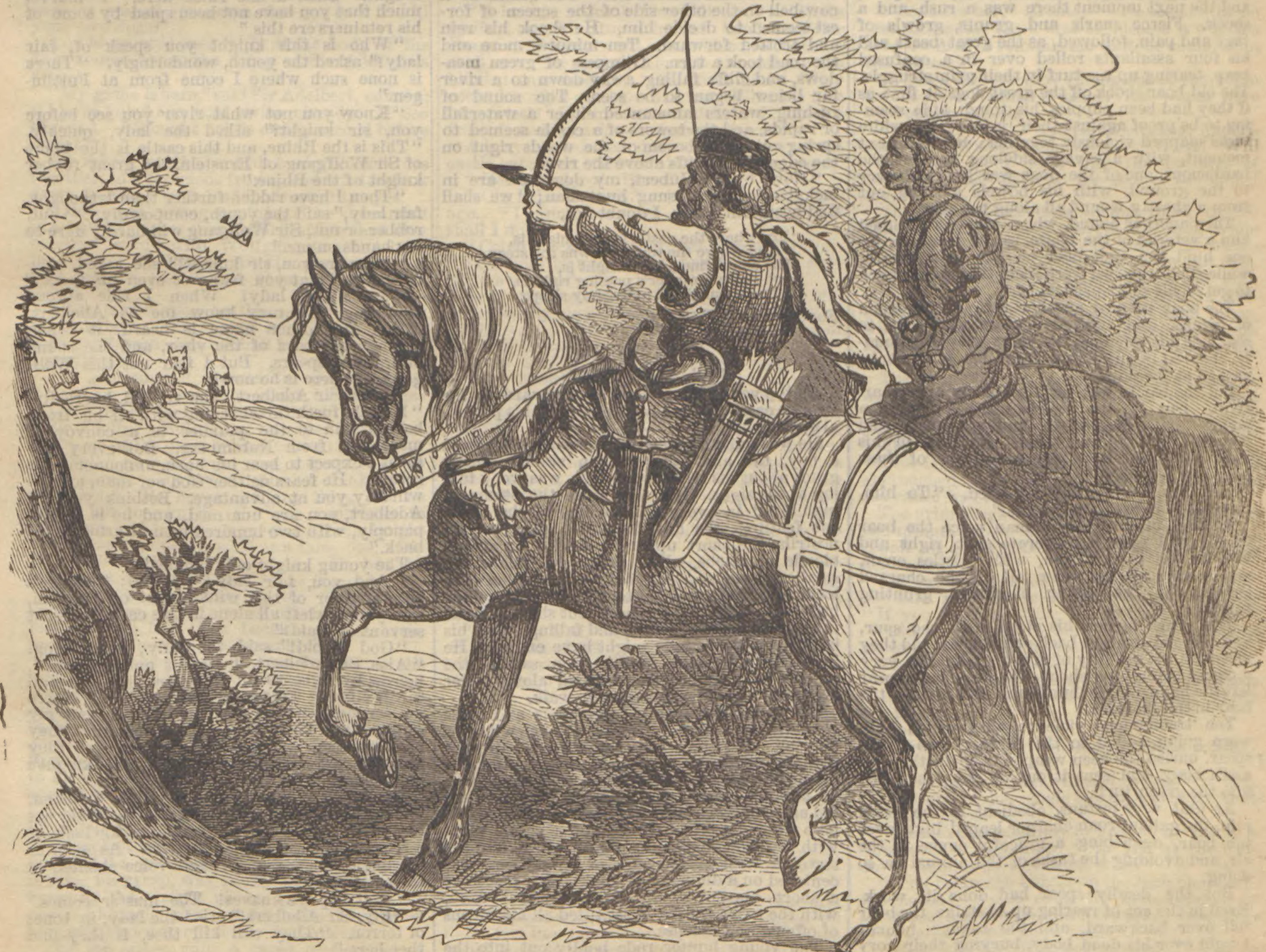
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No. 214.

WOLFGANG, THE ROBBER OF THE RHINE; Or, THE YOUNG KNIGHT OF THE CROSSICORDE.

BY CAPT. FREDERICK WHITTAKER,

AUTHOR OF "THE LOST CAPTAIN," "THE SWORD HUNTERS," "THE DUMB PAGE," "LANCE AND LASSO," ETC., ETC.



MAX, THE RANGER, BENT HIS GREAT BOW AND SENT A WHITE ARROW WHIZZING THROUGH THE AIR.

WOLFGANG,

THE ROBBER OF THE RHINE;

OR,

The Young Knight of the Crossicorde.

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CHAPTER I.

THE BOAR-HUNT.

THE clear notes of a hunter's horn echoed merrily through the deep arches of the Black Forest on a summer's day in the year 1274, and the deep-toned bay of four great boar-hounds added to the clamor.

An old wild boar, with bristles erect, the foam dripping from his long tusks, went plunging through the thorny thickets, his eye all ablaze with rage and fear combined.

He fled from the noise; but as he grew weary of the chase, he seemed to be more inclined every moment to turn and fight.

And at last he reached an open glade in the forest, broad and green, sloping downward to the cultivated fields below. Right across the middle of it ran a sparkling rivulet, and into the stream plunged the hunted boar.

Just as he did so, out of the woods, hard at his heels, came four huge boar-hounds, each as tall as a young calf, gaunt and brindled, with heads like mastiffs and deep, pendent lips, with the low, savage bay that told of their fierce natures.

The old boar gave a single roll in the water, swallowed a hasty mouthful of the living fluid, and then stood at bay, fire in his eyes and foam on his lips.

On came the great boar-hounds, full speed, and the next moment there was a rush and a shock. Fierce snarls and grunts, growls of rage and pain, followed, as the great beast and his four assailants rolled over in a confused heap, tearing up the turf in their grim struggle. The old boar shook off the great dogs at first as if they had been puppies, his tough hide seeming to be proof against their jaws. The white tusks snapped viciously together; and the next moment, with a savage sidelong root of the hard snout, one of the dogs was knocked over to the ground, with his bowels gushing out from a ghastly wound all along the side.

Then another hound, whose scars proclaimed him a veteran of the chase, seized the boar by one hind leg, and held on like grim death, while the other two were mounting on his back to get at his short pricked ears.

The boar uttered another furious succession of grunts, and swayed desperately about to shake off his enemies, his tusks snapping loudly, the red foam flying from his jaws, as he gashed at the dogs.

But the battle was terminated by a new arrival. Out of the woods came galloping a young man, dressed in hunter's garb, and mounted on a red roan steed. He bore in his hands two light boar spears, and one of these he raised as he came.

"At him, brave dogs!" he cried. "To him, Rolando! Brave True-tongue!"

At the sound of the human voice the boar turned and gave a desperate gash, right and left, at the dogs. Then, with bristles erect, and having shaken them all off, he charged straight on the young huntsman, grunting fiercely.

The youth struck his steed with the spur, and charged straight back at the boar, and they met with the velocity of arrows. In the very moment before the shock, the keen boar-spear left the hand of the huntsman and struck the boar in the shoulder.

The tremendous violence with which both were going, added to the force of the flying spear, buried the keen weapon deep in the animal's body, and sent it out on the other side into the green turf.

At that very instant, obedient to the lifted rein, the gallant roan charger leaped high over the boar, describing a graceful curve in the air, and avoiding the tusks of the animal in so doing.

But the deadly spear had done its work. Even in the act of rearing up to strike, the boar fell over backward, and the savage hounds fought over his dead body, burying their gory muzzles in his torn flanks.

"Good True-tongue! Brave Rolando! Bell-mouth, old fellow!" cried the young huntsman,

merrily, as he leaped from his charger and advanced to the dead boar.

The great hounds left their prey and came leaping round him, rearing up to lick his face with clumsy affection, and barking out their joy at the successful hunt.

Old True-tongue alone sat down by the body of his slain comrade, and lifted up his voice in lament for his end. They had been in the same couple so long that the poor old fellow was heartbroken at the loss of his companion, and he sat there, mournfully howling, till the huntsman had cut off the boar's scalp, and placed it at his saddle-bow.

"True-tongue, old friend," said the young man kindly to the old dog, "many a human friend might take lesson by thee, for thou wast a good comrade even to thy dead fellow. But come, dogs, we must be off. The sun is getting low, and we have many a mile to go before we reach home. Come, dogs."

But old True-tongue would not stir from his comrade's body, even when his master had mounted his charger and ridden off. He whined piteously, took short turns backward, and forward, and finally refused to leave. Then the young hunter came back and took up the body of the slain hound. He disemboweled it to make it lighter, and slung it over the croup of his horse.

Old True-tongue wagged his tail for thanks, and trotted on after his dead comrade as contentedly as if he had been alive yet. Then the hunter rode slowly off down the glade toward the open country below. He was evidently at a loss for his whereabouts, for he looked around at the dark forest and out at the fields as if trying to find some absent landmark. He crossed the stream and rode on, followed by his dogs, till a broad, green path with old forsaken ruts that told of passing wheels diverged from the side of the glade into the forest.

Here the huntsman paused as if in doubt whether to follow it or not. The sound of a cow-bell on the other side of the screen of forest seemed to decide him. He shook his rein and trotted forward. Ten minutes more and the road took a turn. Glimpses of green meadows, and cliffs falling away down to a river far below began to be seen. The sound of rushing waters announced either a waterfall or rapids, and the towers of a castle seemed to spring out of the bosom of the woods right on the edge of the cliffs above the river.

"Now, by St. Hubert, my dogs, we are in luck," cried the young huntsman; "we shall find hospitality here, I doubt not,

"For where the castle is the knight is,
And where the tower crowns the steep,
The chatelaine a lady bright is,
And every stranger's passing right is,
To eat and drink and safely sleep."

Forward, dogs!"

CHAPTER II.

SIR ADELBERT.

As the young huntsman rides forward to the strange castle, let us take a glance at his personal appearance.

He was quite a young man, hardly more than a boy, tall and lithe, with a sinewy elastic grace about his trim figure that was very taking to the sight. His face wore the stamp of high blood in every delicate line of the clear-cut features, the aquiline nose, with its thin nostrils; the short upper-lip shaded by a long blonde mustache, whose points fell below the small, round chin. His bright, keen blue eyes looked out from the clustering curls of yellow hair that shaded his forehead, cut short in front in the fashion of the time, and falling down his back in ringlets a lady might have envied. He rode like a centaur in his deep saddle, the mighty red roan charger dancing along under his burden, as if he disdained to walk.

The young huntsman's equipments and dress were fit for a prince, almost too splendid for hunting. His green velvet jerkin and cap were both heavily laced with gold thread, and the plume of white heron's feathers that announced his nobility was clasped in front with a splendid emerald, set round with pearls. His trunk-hose were of white deer-skin, of a single piece with the shoe, and fitting like a glove, and the rowel of each golden spur of knighthood was centered on a diamond of small size. He wore a short hunting-sword on his thigh, which, with the two javelins, constituted all his means of offense and defense.

The young hunter rode boldly out into the open ground, and found himself in a beautiful green meadow, knee-deep in clover and buttercups, and daisies that stretched out to

the very edge of a perpendicular cliff that overhung a river.

A sheet of white foam, streaked with black, indicated the presence of rapids far below, and right on the edge of the cliff, overlooking the river, towered the lofty castle he had seen. The gates were wide open, as if inviting to hospitality the passing traveler, but not a soul was to be seen around.

At each side of the gate rose a lofty tower, the two uniting in a pointed arch over the portcullis, above which hung a picturesque oriel window. Towers and curtains flanked it on either side, rising higher as they stretched up an eminence on which the castle was built, and on which stood the massive frowning donjon or citadel.

But the hunter hardly noticed these things as he rode up to the silent gate. His eyes were fixed on the oriel window that overhung it, for there was a female figure, and the nearer he approached, the closer his gaze was riveted on her, for he was young and he could see that the lady was very beautiful.

She was leaning from the lattice looking down at him, and the young knight drew rein beneath the window, and lifted his cap in obsequious salutation.

The lady had great dark eyes, as soft as a deer's, and her hair was long and jet-black. She appeared nervous and frightened as she looked down, and called to him in a low voice:

"Sir knight, in Heaven's name, go back to the forest—anywhere away from this terrible castle. You are but lost if you stay."

"Nay, sweet lady," replied the youth, smiling; "surely the owner of this castle must be a knight, and the laws of knighthood enjoin nothing if not courtesy and hospitality."

"Ah, sir knight," she said, apprehensively glancing round; "stay not to talk. There are knights who have gained their spurs by no true deeds of valor, and who disgrace the name of knight. Such a one rules here. I marvel much that you have not been spied by some of his retainers ere this."

"Who is this knight you speak of, fair lady?" asked the youth, wonderingly. "There is none such where I come from at Futtlingen."

"Know you not what river you see before you, sir knight?" asked the lady, quickly. "This is the Rhine, and this castle is the home of Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein, the great robber knight of the Rhine."

"Then I have ridden further than I thought, fair lady," said the youth, composedly. "But, robber or not, Sir Wolfgang will hardly dare to lay hands on me."

"Who are you, sir knight?" she asked, wonderingly, "that you fear not even his name?"

"My name, lady? When I ride abroad a-hunting you may know me as Adelbert. When my other name is heard, it comes through the bars of the visor, and the sound of crashing spears. But I fear not this Wolfgang. Where is he now?"

"Alas, Sir Adelbert," she replied, hurriedly; "he rode forth this morning with all his troop behind him to the plunder of a convoy of merchants from Nuremberg. But every moment I expect to hear his horn, announcing his return. He fears neither God nor man, and he will slay you at advantage. Bethink you, Sir Adelbert, you are unarmed, and he is in full panoply, with two hundred men-at-arms at his back."

The young knight only laughed.

"And you, fair lady," he said; "are you the daughter of this wild knight of Ernstein, that you are left all alone in this castle without servant or maid?"

"God forbid!" said the lady, shuddering. "Alas, Sir Adelbert, I am his unhappy ward, heiress by right to all these broad lands; and Sir Wolfgang keeps me prisoner here. There are servants enough here, but they are but my jailers while he is gone. I wonder that they have not seen you before, but I suppose they must be asleep. Hark! there is the knight's bugle now."

Sir Adelbert turned in his saddle to listen, and heard the loud, clear notes of a bugle not far off, followed by the clank, clank, clank, of a trotting column of men-at-arms. As soon as the bugle was heard, a rough voice shouted in the castle court:

"Wake up, ye knaves! The master comes."

"Fly, Sir Adelbert!" cried the lady, in tones of terror. "They will kill thee, if they find thee here."

Sir Adelbert laughed again, and fixed his bright blue eyes on hers with a lingering look.

"I will not leave thee," he said, "till I know

thy sweet name, fair lady, that I may take my knightly oath to deliver thee from thy robber-guardian."

"My name is Bertha von Falkenstein," said the lady, in a hurried tone. "Come when thou wilt, so thou comest armed, but fly now. Ah! too late!"

Sir Adelbert looked behind him up the road he had come, and recognized the cause of the lady's exclamation. A glittering column of men-at-arms came trotting out of the green wood, the crimson rays of the setting sun reflected from their bright armor. Plumes were fluttering, banners waving, horse-heads tossing, and lance-points quivering as the gallant column rode out clashing and jingling.

At the head of all rode a great, strong knight, with a grizzled beard that flowed over his cuirass, reining in a mighty black charger.

"Oh, Heaven defend thee, Sir Adelbert!" cried Bertha, in a voice of terror. "It is Ernstein himself."

Sir Adelbert lifted his plumed cap, and swept it to his stirrup in a low salute.

"Lady Bertha," he said, "I fear not all the robber knights of the Rhine together. Before I go, hear me swear that by the time that the moon has waned and filled once more, the lands of Falkenstein shall own thee for their lady, and Adelbert shall be thy true knight. Farewell!"

He bowed low, replaced his cap, and turned round, followed by his dogs, to meet the coming warriors.

As he came nearer, he perceived that the grizzled chief wore for a crest on his helmet a great golden eagle, whose fierce head seemed to watch above his own, while the broad pinions overshadowed his face.

This was savage and brutal-looking, imperious and haughty, the face of a born tyrant.

"Well, sir knight," he began, roughly accosting the other, as he rode up; "hunters have bad luck who hunt in *my* forests. Have ye been so pushed for game that ye had to kill your own dogs?"

And he pointed sneeringly at the body of the dead hound, across the croup of Sir Adelbert's horse.

"My game is here," said Sir Adelbert, calmly; "I have killed one wild swine already. See his head. I thought not to meet a second before sunset."

The robber knight bent his bushy black brows together, in a ferocious frown, and tried to look down the other with his bloodshot gray eyes.

"How now, young popinjay?" he demanded in a bullying tone; "art weary of life that thou bandiest words with Wolfgang von Ernstein, the King of the Rhine? By the powers of the Pit! beware lest I put thee with thy dead hound."

"The hound died by the will of God," said Sir Adelbert; "he was a true friend and a born gentleman; and he shall have the burial of a gentleman."

"A gentleman!" sneered the great knight; "meseems you are some court fool, who has stolen knight's spurs, by the talk you hold."

Sir Adelbert smiled, and surveyed the gigantic frame of the other with a critical glance.

"Well," he said, "he was a gentleman in many things. He never robbed a weaker dog of his bone. He never did any thing but he feared not to own it. He was courteous to strangers, and he always greeted a true knight with pleasure, and growled at a false one. See his brother here, old True-tongue. He has the same trait, *and by St. Hubert, he is right!*"

He pointed laughingly to old True-tongue and his mates. All three of the huge, stately-looking dogs had their backs up, and were growling defiantly at the stranger.

But the robber knight was furious at the sarcasm, so boldly delivered by this unarmed stranger. He raised his mailed hand with a savage oath, and spurred up alongside of the reckless huntsman, as if to strike him to the earth. A contest between the two was like that between a grayhound and a huge mastiff to all appearance. The tall, slender stranger seemed to have no chance.

But, swift as the grayhound he resembled, Sir Adelbert was out of his reach. Obedient to a touch of the spur, the mighty roan charger bounded to one side, and the heavy knight, missing his grasp, was nearly thrown from his horse by the weight of his panoply. He recovered himself with a violent effort, and drew his great sword to cut down Sir Adelbert.

But the latter, with a rapid motion, raised one of the light boar-spears in his hand, and cast it at the face of Sir Wolfgang like a flash.

Instinctively the knight dodged the missile, but it was too quick to be avoided entirely.

Striking the edge of the raised visor, it glanced aside, the point cutting across the bridge of the nose and blinding the left eye, when it stuck between the side of the helmet and the temple.

Sir Wolfgang uttered a cry like the yell of a wild beast, dropped his sword instinctively, and raised both hands to his face to pull out the javelin. The blood poured out from the gash all over his grizzled beard, and several of the foremost of his men-at-arms, uttering a shout of fury, couched their lances and rushed at the stranger.

But the heavy warriors, in their hundred-weights of steel plates, were too slow for the active Adelbert. He wheeled his roan charger round on its haunches with a defiant halloo, brandishing the remaining spear, and was off like a shot, the great horse bounding like an antelope as he flew past the castle gate.

As he went by, the audacious youth threw up his plumed cap and caught it, quivering on the point of his spear.

"Farewell, sweet maiden!" he gayly cried. "When I come back, welcome a deliverer."

He kissed his hand to poor Bertha, who stood by the lattice, trembling with excitement. Then, away he went into the dark forest, the great boar-hounds bounding by his side, barking loudly to add to the uproar. The clumsy men-at-arms gave up the pursuit as useless, and returned to succor their discomfited chief.

CHAPTER III.

THE ROBBER KNIGHT.

THEN there was a racket around the gray walls of Ernstein Castle. The retainers came running out with loud cries of anger and alarm. Part of them started off, with their bows, on the track of the hunter who had come to beard the lion in his den. The rest crowded around Sir Wolfgang, who was swearing ferociously in thunder tones as he rolled from side to side in his saddle, wild with pain and rage.

"A leech! A leech!" he bellowed. "Hell's malison on your stupid heads! Send me Friar Francis! Do you want me to bleed to death? I shall never see again! The cursed popinjay has blinded me forever! Oh, curse him! Why could I not get one blow at him? Where is that lazy priest? Bid him come quick, or I'll cut his frock from his back with hunting-whips!"

A gray-headed friar came running out of the castle gate, and cried out, in a trembling voice: "Here, my lord! Here!"

"Oh, Friar Francis!" cried the wounded savage. "I cannot see thee! I am blind! What shall I do?"

"Come quickly into the castle," said the friar. "You must be unarmed before I can tell anything about it."

So the discomfited Sir Wolfgang was led into the castle by his retainers, cursing and roaring all the way, and brought into the great hall of the Donjon-keep.

There they unlaced his helmet, and Friar Francis washed and examined the wound, something as he would have done a wild tiger's. Poor Friar Francis was in a sad predicament, being forced to administer religious consolation in this den of thieves to every wounded marauder hurt on a foray. He had been saved alive from the sack of a convent on account of his reputed skill as a surgeon, and many a time had he regretted that the robbers had not killed him then, so many were the humiliations he had to undergo.

"Gently, thou cursed priest!" vociferated Sir Wolfgang, striking blindly and savagely at his poor surgeon. "Dost think thou'rt handling a horse?"

"But, my lord," objected the friar, timidly, "I must wash off this clotted blood to see if both eyes are injured. I can do nothing if you will not keep still."

"Then wash away, curse you," said the knight. "Only mind this: if you don't restore me the sight of one eye at least, I'll have you flayed alive with hot knives."

The poor friar shuddered at the threat, but proceeded to wash away the blood and examine the wounds. He found the right eye uninjured, but the bridge of the nose was cut in two and the left eye completely destroyed.

He announced the fact to the wounded knight, who had hitherto been completely blinded by the blood flowing into the other eye.

Sir Wolfgang looked up for the first time and saw the light with distinctness. He leaped up to his feet in a moment, and, instead of thanks to his leech, he uttered a fearful imprecation on his own head if he failed to avenge the injury on that bold stranger who had wounded him.

"I will follow him all over Germany, and chase him into the lands of the infidel, but what

I will find him," he swore, "and tear his flesh from his bones with red-hot pincers. If I find him at a tourney, I will fight him *a l'outrance**, and when I have vanquished him, I will torture him to death."

The poor friar timidly suggested that the wound should be bound up.

"Ay, bind it up," said Sir Wolfgang, reseating himself; "bind it up, and then order up horses and men, for I will after him this very night."

"My lord," said father Francis, firmly, "if you go forth to-night you will lose your other eye. If inflammation sets in, you will be blind before morning."

Sir Wolfgang hesitated a moment.

"You will never ride in tourney again if you do not lie still for at least a month," pursued the father. "As it is, it will be a hard matter to cure you; but a blind lion is no more dangerous than a seeing puppy."

The angry chief stamped his armed heel, till the hall echoed to the clash, as he saw the truth of the priest's words.

"Hark ye, friar!" he said, with a growl like a tiger; "I'll give you one week exactly to heal these wounds and set me on horseback. If not, then beware!"

He said the last words in a tone of concentrated rage that made the poor friar tremble. Then he gave himself up to the other's charge without a single word.

Friar Francis bound up the wound with trembling hands, and announced to his pleasant patron that he was finished. The crowd of retainers who had been hanging round advanced to curry favor by abusing the stranger, and one of them said:

"So please my lord, Red Max says that he heard the stranger call out to the Lady Bertha as he passed, as if he knew her. Were it not well to question her?"

The old robber knight turned around fiercely.

"Send for her," he said. "He seemed to be just such a fair-faced brat as pleases a wench's fancy. And it reminds me that he came from the castle."

A dozen lackeys were racing out of the room to obey the command before the words were well out his mouth.

"Clear the hall," said Sir Wolfgang, imperiously, to the rest of the idlers. "What! Will you thrust your noses into the business of noble knights? Back to the end of the hall, I say!"

The abashed servitors shrunk back to the huge fireplace in the center of the hall, while the knight turned sullenly to warm his hands over a charcoal brazier that stood on the dais. The men-at-arms were all at the stables still, attending to their horses, and the lackeys clustered round the fire, whispering to each other, when a door at the side of the dais opened, and Bertha von Falkenstein glided into the room, and stood before her rough guardian.

The young maiden was dressed like a princess, in velvets of Genoa and satins of Lyons, and her black hair fell down her back in two long plaits, while a coronet of jewels was on her white brow.

Poor Bertha looked timid and forlorn as she approached Sir Wolfgang. Her only friend in the castle was the friar.

The grim knight let her stand by him for a full minute before he spoke. Then he turned round his bloody, bandaged head, and gruffly demanded:

"What brought you here, mistress?"

"You sent for me," said the girl, timidly. "If you don't want me, I'll go back, my lord."

"Stay, now you're here," was the gracious answer. "I want to speak to you."

The girl waited in silence.

"Who was that young hound on the roan horse, who spiked me here, curse him?" asked Sir Wolfgang.

Bertha trembled.

"I know not what you mean," she said faintly.

The grim castellan turned round on her, glaring out of his single eye in a manner that froze her blood.

"I mean that popinjay in green," he said in a slow sneer, "who talked with you at the window. Who is he, and what is he?"

"You mean the knight on the roan charger?" she asked — "who came by here, belated in the chase, and who would have asked hospitality of us? I do not know him."

"H'm" said Sir Wolfgang, slowly. "You do not know him. Well then, my fair mistress, what did he say to you?"

*Literally, "to the uttermost."

"He told me that he would call again," she said, boldly, "and tear down this wicked castle, and cleanse the Rhine of robbers."

"He did, did he?" said the knight, scornfully; "and with what, pray? With boar-spears? No, by the light of heaven! Once he foiled me; I admit ye that. But the next time let him look to himself when the King of the Rhine puts lance in rest. Stay. Did he tell you his name?"

"He said his name was Adelbert," she answered, "while he was hunting, but that ne would only tell his other name from the barred visor among splintering lances."

"Says he so?" said Sir Wolfgang, thoughtfully. "My faith, he must be a prince at least. Is that all he said?"

"Yes, sir," said Bertha, courtesying, and the rapidly-darkening shadow of the hall alone hid the burning blush that suffused her cheek as she said it.

"To your chamber, then," said the knight, sternly. "Keep away from the lattice or you may find yourself in a room that has none. Go."

Bertha retired hastily. Sir Wolfgang called for his supper.

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLOWER OF COURTESY.

THE full moon shone down through the dense foliage of the dark forest, peeping in here and there through the little gaps among the leaves, and weaving bright patterns on the thin grass and brown earth below. There was no underwood to make it dangerous to travel, only immense overarching oaks above, where the peasants said the fairies were wont to dance in the moonlight, in the magic circles of fungi.

Through the silent arches of this great forest suddenly sounded the snort of a horse, and presently a single horseman, accompanied by three great dogs, came riding through the greenwood at a rapid walk.

It was the audacious Sir Adelbert, the rein hanging loose on his charger's neck, the sagacious creature moving confidently forward, as if he knew well where he was going.

The young knight was talking to his four friends, and they all seemed as though they understood him. The horse kept one ear cocked backward, as if he were listening, and every now and then uttered a low whinny. The dogs answered with little whines, and a low, smothered *wuff*, their tails waving back and forth unwearily.

"Well, dogs! Well, Tristram, old horse!" said Adelbert, "we shall soon reach safe harbor for the night, now. Tristram knows the way to the nearest stable, and where to find shelter for us all. We have had a long journey and a weary one, but it will soon be over. Good old Tristram! Thou art a better friend than a brother, for thou hast brought me home at last, or what is as good now."

And he patted his charger's neck affectionately at the sight of a light gleaming through the wood afar off.

The horse stepped out faster than ever, breaking into a glad neigh, and quickening his pace to a trot, while all three dogs simultaneously broke out into joyful barks, and galloped on ahead.

In a few minutes they had arrived in front of a clearing in the woods which opened into the cultivated country once more, and beheld before them a long, low, rambling stone farmhouse, heavily thatched. The light proceeded from a window in this house, at one end of the building, in a sort of extension or kitchen. Sir Adelbert rode boldly up to the door, and called out:

"House! House! Within there!"

The house was immediately thrown open, and a comely peasant-woman made her appearance on the threshold, with a child in her arms. She seemed to have been expecting some one, for she showed no surprise.

"Max, is 't thou?" she exclaimed. "Baby and I have been watching for thee since sunset. We heard the hounds bark, and guessed 'twas thou. Come in."

"Good lady," said Sir Adelbert, with as much courtesy as though he were addressing a princess, "I fear you take me for some one else—"

The woman shrunk into the doorway in evident alarm.

"Who—who are you, sir?" she asked, in trembling tones. "Pray do not harm us."

"God forbid!" said Sir Adelbert; "I am a hunter who has lost his way, and has had to ride hard to escape from Wolfgang of Ernstein and his robber crew. I crave only hospitality

for the night, for which I will pay amply. If you fear to admit me, I will e'en ride on, for my knighthood's vow compels me to respect the weakest of the sex to which the mother of Christ belonged. But I humbly crave of you not to fear me."

There was something so delicate and gentle in his voice, that the woman seemed to be a little reassured.

"Dismount, sir knight," she said, timidly. "Heaven forbid I should refuse you hospitality, but there are so many false knights and robbers in these parts that I feared you might be one."

Sir Adelbert dismounted, and advanced into the light of the open doorway.

"Look at me well, dame," he said, gently; "and if you still fear to admit me, I will go on."

The young mother looked earnestly into the handsome, high-bred face, lit up by the open, pleasant smile that distinguished Sir Adelbert. The baby, that was sitting up in her arms, looking out on the world with her innocent blue eyes, settled the point. The child stretched out its arms, with a soft coo, to the handsome knight, and the mother instantly relented.

"You must be good, my lord," she said, simply, "or little Gretchen would not want to go to you. Enter and welcome."

"Kind dame," said the knight, smiling, "I fear I must trouble you first to show me where your stable is, for my horse has traveled far today."

"Certainly, my lord," said the dame. "We have fodder and stable-room in plenty. Follow me."

She came boldly out and opened a door at one end of the rambling house, which proved to be that of a great lean-to stable, opening into the house itself from within. The dame opened the door inside, and the light from the inner room streamed into the stable, while she pointed out to the knight several large stalls, with hay and grain in profusion. She did not seem to be afraid of the three great boar-hounds who walked around her sedately, waving their tails slowly, now and then licking her hands.

"Oh, I know them well enough," she answered, to a remark of Sir Adelbert on the subject; "Max has two just like them, that he bought as puppies, from the gracious emperor's keeper. They smell their friends' scent on my clothes, and that's why they come round me. Sir knight, you have a beautiful horse there."

"I think so, dame," said Sir Adelbert, patting the feeding charger's neck, affectionately. "He comes from an Arabian stallion that my great grandsire brought from the great Crusade and the blood has given such life and swiftness to the horses in our family, that we keep them sacred. Now, dame, I am ready. Tristram will do for the night."

The dame shut the outer door, and led master and dogs into the little kitchen.

"Be seated, sir knight," she said, as quietly as if she had known him for years. "I will feed your poor dogs, for they must be hungry, and then we will have supper, if Max does not come in soon. Ah! there he is!"

The sound of galloping hoofs was heard outside, and the barking of more dogs. Sir Adelbert's hounds pricked up their ears, and each uttered a low *wuff*!

The knight spoke sternly to them.

"Lie down, dogs," he said, sharply; "manners."

The last word appeared to have some meaning to it in the dogs' minds. The three retired to the side of the room, and laid themselves down as still as statues, in a line. Meanwhile, the sound of the approaching horseman and dogs increased, and the young mother seemed hesitating whether to leave her guest or not.

"Welcome your husband by all means, dame," said Sir Adelbert; "I will make myself at home by your fire."

"Thank you, sir," she said, simply; "I did not like to seem rude."

And she hustled out, baby in arms, to meet the new-comer.

Sir Adelbert drew near the great wood fire, whose cheerful glow was very grateful after the chilly night air of the greenwood. He turned over a log to make the blaze spring up, and fell into a fit of musing, not altogether pleasant it would seem, for he frowned thoughtfully.

The sound of voices outside aroused him from his reverie, and directly afterward his hostess entered the room, followed by a short man with immense breadth of shoulders, very long, brawny arms, bare to the shoulder, and a square, determined, but good-humored face, half-hidden by a portentous yellow-beard.

"This is my husband, Max, the Ranger," said the dame, frankly. "He is come to welcome your lordship."

Sir Adelbert stood up in the low kitchen, his bright curls reaching within a foot of the ceiling, and held out his hand.

"Friend Max," he said, "thou hast a brave little wife, to stay all alone here. I have heard thy name before, I think. Thou art Ranger to the Margrave of Wurtemburg. Is't not so?"

The Ranger looked up at the lofty figure of the knight, and glanced over his rich dress. He twirled his own leather cap between his hands, and seemed strangely abashed.

"Yes, my lord—I mean—your—" he stammered.

"Call me Sir Adelbert, Max," said the knight impressively, "while I am here; remember that."

"Yes, Sir Adelbert," said Max, in a low voice.

"And now, dame," said Sir Adelbert, laughing, "if you have any mercy on two hungry hunters and five hungry dogs, give Max the baby and let us have some supper, an't please you."

Honest Max took his baby in his arms without saying a word, still keeping his eyes on the ground, but glancing up furtively at the stranger, when he thought he was not looking. His wife hustled about to set the table, with a running commentary of remarks to her husband as an aside.

"Sit up, Max. Don't be so bashful," she said. "The strange lord won't eat you. Talk to him and amuse him, or he'll think you grudge him hospitality."

Then to Sir Adelbert:

"Pray excuse him, Sir Adelbert. My good man is always dashed at the sight of great folks, though why he should at you I don't see, for a more civil gentleman never entered our house."

To Max.

"Mercy, man! Mind what you're about! You'll drop the baby if you're so awkward. See, she wants to go to the knight."

In fact, the baby's father seemed to be incapable of doing any thing but sit and look awkward, and the baby, being uncomfortable, began to fidget and writhe about, with evident longings to ward the glittering dress of the strange knight. Sir Adelbert stretched out his arms with a smile, and the baby responded with a *crow*.

"Give her to me, Max," said the splendid stranger; and the Ranger awkwardly rose, blushing excessively, and obeyed the request.

The knight, in all his bravery of velvet and gold, took the poor Ranger's child on his knee, and talked to and played with her as if he had been at it all his life, while the mother looked delightedly on, and the father gazed at the spectacle as if he was bewildered.

A low scratching and whining was now heard at the door and Sir Adelbert's hounds raised their heads quickly, and one of them whined in answer.

"Manners!" cried the knight, sharply.

The dog shrunk down as if ashamed of himself, and his companions followed his example immediately.

"Have you got your hounds in as good order as that, Max?" asked Sir Adelbert, smiling.

The Ranger stood up, as stiff as a post, instantly. The question made him professional at once.

"Yes, Sir Adelbert," he said, plainly enough.

"Let them in, then, if you can keep them from fighting," said the knight.

The Ranger went to the door and let in two boar-hounds as large as Sir Adelbert's. The stately creatures stalked solemnly into the room, without noticing the knight, but halted and uttered a suspicious growl at the sight of the three strange hounds. Instantly five backs rose, and five sets of white teeth were shown, while a low growl, like the mutter of thunder, became audible from the great beasts.

"St!" said Max.

"Manners!" said Sir Adelbert again.

The dogs became as still as death in a moment.

Then Max, the Ranger, pointed with his finger to a place beside Sir Adelbert's hounds, and sternly ordered his dogs to it.

The well-trained creatures lay down side by side with the others, and assumed the same attitude, when there was peace in the cottage.

And now the dame announced supper as ready, and Sir Adelbert set to with a hearty appetite on black bread and bacon. But, Max, the Ranger, seemed still to be unable to eat for bashfulness. Sir Adelbert noticed it.

"Dame," he said, suddenly, "what name shall I call you?"

"Gretchen, an't please you, my lord," she said, courtesying; "the same as little Gretchen."

"My good Gretchen," he said, "you have a dairy, no doubt. Will you kindly fetch me a cup of milk? I do not quite like your Rhine wines. I never did."

"Certainly, my lord," she said, and hustled out.

As soon as she was gone, Sir Adelbert turned to Max.

"You know me, Max," he said, quickly. "You must keep a better face on you, I tell you; for, when I wish to be secret, I don't choose to be betrayed. Remember that I am only Sir Adelbert now. Do as I tell you, and you will find your reward. Behave as you have, and I shall think you a fool. I want to ask you several questions when your wife comes back. See that you answer them like the Margrave's Ranger. What, man? You're not afraid of him. You need not be of me. Now be sure and remember."

Dame Gretchen came back and found her guest questioning her husband, the latter answering promptly.

"How far are we here from Ernstein Castle?" he asked.

"About twenty miles, Sir Adelbert," said Max.

"And Tuttlingen?" asked Sir Adelbert.

"Over sixty," said Max promptly.

"Then, by St. Hubert!" exclaimed Sir Adelbert, "Red Tristram has carried me well to-day; for I rode from Tuttlingen only this morning. Now, Max, this knight of Ernstein, how did he come there, and how long has he been there?"

"Sir Rudolph von Falkenstein was the true owner of the castle," replied Max. "He lived during the reign of the Emperor Conrad IV., of blessed memory, and the castle was called Falkenstein, or Falcon's rock. A pair of falcons had built in a crevice in the precipice from time immemorial, and the castle was named from them."

"But this Wolfgang," asked Sir Adelbert, "how did he come into the castle?"

"During the Great Interregnum," said Max, gravely. "When all Germany was nineteen years without a chief, then the knights on the borders of the Rhine began to rob all the poor traders and farmers. And Sir Rudolph was the only one that would not join their wicked league. So then they banded together to destroy him, but he shut himself up in his castle and defied them. And there was a great, strong squire in his service called Wolfgang, and he grew into great favor with Sir Rudolph because he could overthrow any knight among them in the tilt. But this Wolfgang was a traitor after all. The knights of the Robber's League suddenly retired from before the castle, and Wolfgang swore they were gone. And Sir Rudolph went out hunting one day with his squire and some pages, leaving the lady Bertha in the castle with their baby, just like our little Gretchen there. And he never came back alive."

"Ha! and what happened to him?" asked Sir Adelbert, in an earnest tone of interest.

"Wolfgang ran back at full gallop to the castle," said the Ranger, "pursued by a squad of men-at-arms, who took care not to catch him. He told the lady Bertha how they had been surprised, and how Sir Rudolph was dead from an arrow in his breast. And then the castle was besieged again, and between fear and grief the lady Bertha died, leaving the baby, about six months old then, to Wolfgang for a guardian. But, once she was dead, Wolfgang opened the castle gates, admitted the enemy, and one of the robber knights, dubbed him, the traitor, a knight of the Empire. Well do I remember the day, for I was a boy, in the train of the castle ranger, then, and Sir Wolfgang made us all swear fealty to him, on pain of instant death."

"Well," said Sir Adelbert, "is that all?"

"That was seventeen years ago," said Max; "and ever since that he has been the terror of the country. I left his service, and took the place of Ranger to the Margrave, ten years ago, and since then we have not been troubled with his requisitions. The Margrave is too powerful for him."

"And since the coming of our blessed emperor, Rudolph of Hapsburg, whom the saints preserve!" said Gretchen, piously, "we have been praying that the good emperor would hear of his deeds and come with an army to exterminate him and all his friends. Oh! Sir Knight! you seem to be some great lord. If you could only see the good emperor, and tell him what a wicked wretch is this Wolfgang, and how he has robbed the poor dear child, Lady Bertha, who knows what might happen?"

Sir Adelbert smiled.

"Perhaps the emperor knows it already," he said. "Germany was in a sad state when he took the throne, a year ago, but everything cannot be done at once. What made this Wolfgang take the name of Ernstein?"

"For spite," said the Ranger, gruffly. "He was a poor falconer, and your worship knows, Sir Adelbert, that the falcon is a gentle bird, and will abide none but those of high degree near her. This Wolfgang was the son of a butcher, and the falcons of Falkenstein grew disgusted when he came, and left their nest to build elsewhere. The robber tried to take their nestlings to train for *eyases*. He had no man in his thieving band could reclaim a *haggard*.* When they left he sent a man to lie in wait and shoot a golden eagle, which he took for his crest, and called himself Ernstein, but no eagle ever built there, since he came. The people here call it Schweinstein or Hog's Rock now."

Sir Adelbert laughed.

"You are a good falconer, Max," he said.

The Ranger growled. His professional pride was in question. "A falcon and a highbred hound are gentlemen," he said; "they love not these upstarts. Gold spurs do not make a knight of Wolfgang, nor ever will. A falcon knows better than a man how to tell a gentleman."

"And what do you think a gentleman ought to be, Max?" asked Sir Adelbert, smilingly.

"A true knight," said Max, simply and reverently.

"Thou'rt right, Max," said the knight, gravely; "and a true knight should be brave, honorable, and as gentle as a woman to all beneath him. If he is such, he is worthy of knighthood. Without it, the sword of the Holy Father Pope himself could not make him one whit better than before."

"How few true knights there are!" said Gretchen, simply.

"Dame," said Sir Adelbert, "pray that there may be more, to cleanse this sink of iniquity. Pray that our knights may carry the cross in their hearts as their ancestors did over them, when they won the Holy Sepulcher. Then shall poor bleeding Germany return to peace, and these Robbers of the Rhine be taught the lesson, **RIGHT NOT MIGHT**."

He stood up as he spoke, with a strange solemn dignity pervading his earnest young face, and signed to Max."

The Ranger jumped up with alacrity, and obeyed the mute signal, given as if unconsciously, by one used to be obeyed.

"This way, Sir Adelbert," he said; "your chamber is ready." And he lighted the stranger knight from the room as obsequiously as if he had been a prince.

CHAPTER V.

THE SLEUTH-HOUND.

THE next morning rose bright and clear, and at an early hour Max the Ranger stood by his door holding two horses by the bridles and surrounded by the five gigantic boar-hounds, now apparently excellent friends. Their dead comrade was buried.

One of the horses was Red Tristram, as fresh as a daisy; the other was the Ranger's bay cob. In the full light of morning one could see the vast strength of Max's sturdy frame. Short as he was, he appeared to possess the brawn of a bull, while yet very lean and large-boned. His legs were slightly bowed from his constant riding, and bare as far as his ankles. His whole dress being a tight jerkin without sleeves, and breeches half way to the knee, both of leather. He carried a mighty bow and quiver, and a short ax hung at his girdle.

Sir Adelbert, trim, neat and handsome as ever, stood by the doorway, talking to Dame Gretchen, with the little baby in her arms.

"Farewell, dame," he said, kindly. "For your hospitality accept the thanks of a knight who honors his knighthood as better than himself. Your husband has promised to show me the way to the Margrave's, whom I would see. Little Gretchen will kiss me good-by, I doubt not, and wear this in memory of Sir Adelbert."

And he took from his neck a costly gold chain and passed it over the child's fat neck. Little Gretchen caught hold of the bright links and crowded with delight, while her mother's face seemed to shine with pleasure. The knight kissed the child's innocent brow, and was turning away, when the deep bay of a hound, fol-

* The eyas was the young hawk taken from the nest. The haggard is the full grown wild falcon, caught in a net, and consequently more difficult to reclaim or tame.

lowed by a second at no great distance, startled every one.

Max looked toward the woods angrily.

"It is a sleuth-hound," he said, "and on the track, too, and in the Margrave's woods. Who has dared to do this?"

Sir Adelbert listened intently. The sound was coming toward them.

"Are there any other rangers near here?" he asked of Max.

"Not one," said the other, angrily; "I am the only man that has a right to range these woods, except the Margrave and his friends."

"Has the Margrave any friends near here?" asked the knight.

"Impossible," said Max sturdily; "his lordship knows me, and—by St. Hubert! they're coming this way."

"I thought so," said Sir Adelbert, calmly; "it is Wolfgang of Ernstein, or some of his men, on the hunt."

"He!" cried Max, aghast with anger and astonishment; "I'll shoot the brute if he comes within range."

"They are not after deer," said Sir Adelbert, quietly; "they are after me."

Max dropped both bridles in his excess of wonder. He glanced apprehensively at Gretchen, then, as if afraid his ears had deceived him, he said in a low voice:

"Not you—Sir Adelbert. *They dare not.*"

For all answer, Sir Adelbert signed to him to listen.

The low savage bay was coming straight toward the Ranger's cottage. It came nearer and nearer.

Now they could hear the gallop of several horses over the withered leaves. Sir Adelbert turned to Gretchen, and spoke firmly and rapidly, as one accustomed to command.

"Go into the house, dame," he said. "If you have a cellar or any strong hiding-place, hide quickly. Danger's afoot."

"To the secret closet under the stable!" cried Max. "The devils are coming, sure enough. For your life! I am quite safe."

Poor Gretchen uttered a cry of alarm and vanished into the house.

"To horse, Max," said Sir Adelbert, quickly. "We must fight, I see."

In another moment the two were on horseback, and moving toward the wood whence the baying came.

"I wonder they did not think of this before," said Sir Adelbert, thoughtfully; "I suppose they thought to catch me asleep."

The Ranger suddenly pulled up and sprung to the ground.

"Here they come," he said, briefly; and he strung his bow as he spoke, and drew out half a dozen arrows from his quiver, which he threw on the ground at his feet.

Sir Adelbert looked forward. Two deep tawny bloodhounds, with black muzzles, came loping along in front of a party of seven or eight horsemen in blue livery, with a gilt eagle on each man's breast.

As soon as the new-comers saw the two men, they uttered a great shout, and came forward, brandishing, each man, a couple of boar-spears.

Sir Adelbert shook his own javelin, and waited in silence. Max the Ranger bent his great bow when they were within fifty yards, and sent a white arrow, a good yard in length, whizzing through the air.

One of the bloodhounds rolled over and over with a faint howl, spitted through the body, and his companion paused in alarm.

With a shout of encouragement to his own great boar-hounds, Sir Adelbert set spurs to Red Tristram and rode at his enemies.

CHAPTER VI.

SIR ADELBERT'S MESSAGE.

SIR WOLFGANG of Ernstein sat on the raised dais of his castle hall, with his head bound up, eating his breakfast, and listening to the report of his head ranger, commonly known as Red Max, from his fiery beard. Red Max was a truculent ruffian with lowering brow, as different in expression from his honest namesake, Max the Ranger, as could be imagined, while his figure was not unlike the latter's.

"So the trackers did not start till midnight, my lord," he was saying; "your worship gave me full discretion, and I took it. I knew that if this stranger were out in the woods and heard the hounds, he would know he was pursued. He might have sent back his own hounds to fight ours, and escaped himself. But if we let him get to shelter, he could not go very far, and we could probably take him by surprise in the morning. So I sent eight riders, with a pair of sleuth-hounds, after him, and they must have

found him about dawn, for the dogs started on the track at a round pace."

Sir Wolfgang gave a satisfied grunt, and drank off a cup of Rhenish wine.

"When do you expect them back," he asked.

"Very soon, my lord. It is ten of the clock now, and I told them to gallop back with him as soon as they found him, dead or alive."

"The Lord grant they don't kill him," said Sir Wolfgang, grimly; "I would have him here before me bound. I will make him feel what it is to lose an eye. I will cut him to pieces, limb by limb, and feed his flesh to the dogs, while he shall look on at the feast. Would they were back now!"

Red Max put up his hand in sign of attention.

"That must be them, now," he said. "I hear horses' feet on the stones of the court-yard."

He ran to the window and looked out.

"There they are, my lord," he said, joyfully. "There's Peter the Killer, who led the party. The rest must be under the archway."

"Run and bring them. Quick, Max," said Sir Wolfgang, rubbing his hands with ferocious glee. Bring him in."

Red Max rushed off down the hall and out into the castle-yard, while Sir Wolfgang waited in his great chair.

As he sat there, looking eagerly toward the door with his remaining eye, Bertha von Falkenstein glided into the room behind his chair, and stood near him.

He did not notice her, so fierce and intent was his gaze on the hall door. The moments of waiting grew into minutes, and still no Red Max came.

"What the devil ails them?" growled Sir Wolfgang angrily. "It can't be—Hell's furies on them!—They haven't failed!"

Bertha glided forward, and put her white hand on his arm.

"My lord," she said softly.

Wolfgang started as if he had been shot. She was on his blind side. He wheeled round fiercely and demanded:

"What do you mean, creeping cat of the castle, by coming in like that? What do you want?—I'm busy."

Bertha recoiled, trembling.

"So please, my lord," she began; "I only wished to know if I might still have permission to walk in the little court on the battlements by the river. I pine in my chamber, and Father Francis says that I need the air."

Sir Wolfgang regarded her something as a tiger might do after a full meal. He did not feel quite justified in tearing her to pieces, not feeling hungry just then.

"Yes," he growled, with his accustomed easy grace; "I don't want to ill treat you, creeping cat. Nobody can say I don't give you plenty of fine clothes, whenever I can find a lot of merchants with such things. You needn't go around looking as if you were afraid. I won't kill you. Walk where you like, but keep out of the castle court. The dogs there run at every woman they find. *I taught them.*"

He gave a grim chuckle at the pale face, and the girl shrunk back to the door, just as Red Max's voice was heard outside, saying:

"Come along, Peter, and tell your story."

"THEY'VE FAILED!" roared Sir Wolfgang, leaping to his feet, and he strode off down the hall.

Bertha stood behind the door, which she held ajar, and peeped down after him. The door was in the shadow, and she was quite unseen, while able to behold all that passed in the hall.

Red Max entered the hall, dragging after him the reluctant figure of a second ruffian, whom she recognized as Peter the Killer.

She saw Sir Wolfgang rush at this man, seize him as a mastiff might a terrier, and shake him with all the vast strength of his powerful frame.

Dog!" roared the irate castellan, "where is your prisoner? What do you back here without him? Speak, or I'll throttle you!"

And he flung the Killer up against the wall, and stood before him foaming with rage.

Peter the Killer was a cutthroat and assassin by trade, but he cowered before the more powerful villain.

"We could not help it, my lord," he faltered. "We found him but he had help. Let me speak first, my lord, and then kill me if you will."

"Speak, then," said Sir Wolfgang, more quietly; "tell me the whole story, and then we shall see if you deserve death or not."

Peter the Killer trembled and told his story.

"My lord," he said, "we took out the hounds

at night, and followed the horse's track. It ran here and there, as if the rider had lost his way, and finally went off in a straight line, through the woods of the Margrave of Wurtemburg. Just about sunrise we came to where the Margrave's ranger lives, Max Stoffler, who is properly your vassal, my lord. He ran away the year after Lady Bertha's—"

"Silence," growled Sir Wolfgang, with a strange look; "no more of that, Peter. I know that Max Stoffler; and I'll be even with him some day, curse him! But not yet. The Margrave musters five hundred lances. Go on."

"In front of the cottage," continued Peter, "we found the stranger and that same Max together, with five boar-hounds. We charged them; but before we could get there Max had shot both our dogs, and Karl Keiser. The stranger then charged us, with all the dogs. He was a perfect devil. He sent his boar-spear into another man's heart, and used his sword like a master. Still, we could have taken him, easy enough, but for those dogs. The brutes came on all together, and had five men off their horses in a twinkling. Max Stoffler shot my horse, and the fight was over before you would have thought it begun. Every man there was speared, shot, or torn to pieces in two minutes."

Wolfgang glared at the Killer for several minutes in silence.

"And you?" he said, at last in a low, stifled voice, "how came you here alive."

"Through the stranger's whim," said Peter, humbly; "I was under my horse, and one of the devils of dogs was coming at me when the strange knight called out to him, 'Manners!' The brute lay down like a lamb in an instant. Then the stranger and Max Stoffler pulled me out, set me on a horse, and told me to go home and give you a message."

"What is it?" queried the castellan, frowning fearfully.

"If your worship will promise not to kill me," began Peter, deprecatingly, "it is not I who say the words, but the stranger."

"Say the words first," said Sir Wolfgang, grimly. "I'll see whether you deserve death on your own merits."

Thus urged, Peter broke out into a profuse sweat, and his knees knocked together.

"The message! Quick!" thundered his patron, shaking him furiously, "or I'll kill thee anyhow."

Peter the Killer fell on his knees and writhed up to embrace those of his master. His face was ashy-pale with the craven fear of death.

"Oh! master, for the love of God!" he implored, "don't kill me. Let me rot in any dungeon, but don't kill me. Oh! I'm so wicked, and Father Francis says the devils have red-hot forks to stick in one."

Sir Wolfgang dealt him a furious blow with his clinched hand, that knocked him down on the stone pavement. He lifted his foot to stamp on him, his face crimson with passion.

"The message!" he bellowed; "the message, quick, cur and dastard, or I'll stamp your bowels out on the floor."

Peter the Killer was driven to desperation, and he writhed up on his knees, once more, with a howl of:

"Mercy! Mercy! I'll tell! Indeed I will!"

"Then tell quick!" growled the castellan, drawing back, and looking down at him with contempt. Peter breathed hard and clasped his hands with a look of abject terror and supplication.

"The stranger said," he mumbled, in a faint whisper of extreme fear, "Tell Wolfgang, the butcher's son, that I shall come to his castle before the leaves are brown. That his father's cleaver shall strike from his heels the spurs he has disgraced, and that he and his friends shall swing from the trees in front of Falkenstein Castle before Michaelmas."

Peter shrunk up against the wall, expecting to receive at least a dagger-thrust. To his surprise his amiable patron was silent.

He looked up. The castellan had turned his back, and was walking up the hall slowly, with his hands behind him. He turned presently and came back, surveying Peter with a thoughtful gaze.

"Repeat the message," he said, quietly.

Peter repeated it, word for word. When he had done, his master laid his hand on his shoulder with sudden kindness.

"Go to the kitchen and eat, Peter," he said; "you are tired and hungry. No man can be certain of any thing in war. Send Father Francis to me."

Peter the Killer rose slowly, relief and bewilderment struggling together in his face.

"Yes, my lord," he said, and vanished.

Sir Wolfgang sat in his chair in a brown study, and Bertha softly closed the door to retreat. In the passage to her chamber she met the good friar, and told him the story. Father Francis reflected and said:

"The wicked flee when no man pursueth. He is frightened at the message."

CHAPTER VII.

SIR WOLFGANG'S MISTAKE.

FATHER FRANCIS entered the hall softly, and approached his grim jailer. Sir Wolfgang turned round to him with a quiet and natural look and voice, but with a slight tone of vexation.

"Father Francis," he said, "what stuff is this that you have been telling my men here?"

"I do not know," said the friar, calmly; "I have told them many things. What do you mean?"

"I mean this about red-hot pitchforks, devils, and so on," said the knight, sternly; "Peter the Killer was the most desperate fellow in my band, and you have got him frightened so that he is afraid to die."

The monk smiled gravely and sweetly.

"There are many steps on the ladder to heaven," he said, quietly, and without a sign of fear; "the sinner must be convinced of his sins before he can long for pardon."

Sir Wolfgang gave a bitter laugh.

"Bah," he said, contemptuously; "monks' lies to fool the people. How do you know anything about hell? Were you ever there?"

"No," said the friar, quietly; "but I believe my Master's word. So the devils do, and they tremble."

"Do I?" asked Sir Wolfgang, fiercely starting up and confronting the friar. Father Francis faced him boldly and quietly.

"In the still watches of the night," he said, softly, "when the castle is all still save for the scampering mice, did you never start, and think some one you had wronged was near you?"

Sir Wolfgang fell back into his chair, and regarded the other with a startled look.

"How do you know that?" he asked in a low voice, but with a tigerish gleam in his eye.

"I know nothing," said the father; "nothing but my Master's word. One message has reached you to-day. HE sends you a second. It is a question."

"What is it?" asked the castellan, his voice shaking ever so little in spite of his firmness, at the quiet, impressive manner of the priest.

"It is this," said the friar, and he raised his hand and pointed upward to heaven, and then downward.

"Had Zimri peace who slew his master?"

Sir Wolfgang, for perhaps the first time, turned deadly pale. The next moment he sprung up and hurled himself on the helpless priest with a low, savage oath.

"Thou liest," he hissed between his teeth, as he choked the other against the wall: "no man saw me do it, and thou shalt follow him. I'll teach thee to sow dissension in my flock, intermeddling priest, and turn my bullies into cowards."

And he compressed his terrible gripe on the friar's throat till the latter was black in the face and nearly dead. Then he dashed the inoffensive man on the floor of the dais with a great crash and turned away triumphantly, muttering to himself.

"I've settled him, at all events."

He started to behold close to him the figure of Bertha von Falkenstein, marble pale, with dilated eyes. The poor priest lay on the ground, the blood flowing from a deep cut on the side of his head where he had struck on the stone pavement, to all appearance dying. Bertha was transformed in looks. The timid girl, shrinking from her guardian's brutality, had changed for the moment, into an avenging goddess, white, fearless, and wonderfully beautiful.

She marched straight on Sir Wolfgang, her little hand raised, and pointing with intense scorn and anger at his face.

"Coward," she cried, her clear, shrill tones ringing through the empty hall, and out of the open windows; "coward and false knight, to strike down the helpless man of God! Too long have we borne with thee and thy wicked deeds, Wolfgang the traitor! I have submitted to thy tyranny till the time has past to bear it! I will call on the emperor for help to clear my heritage of the robber that has stolen it. I will go forth from here, and beg my way to him, and stop me if you dare. You have killed the only good creature in this wicked place and God will punish you for it. The best, the kindest,

est man! Oh, father Francis! Good father! What shall I do without you?"

Her sudden tempest of indignation ended in a wild burst of weeping, as she sunk down and took the poor wounded head on her lap. There was a rushing of feet in the hall, and a crowd of retainers, attracted by the unusual tones of poor Bertha's voice, came running in to see what was the matter. When they saw it there was a subdued murmur of sympathy and anger among them. Wild and wicked as were the crew in that castle, there was hardly one but had experienced some kindness at the hands of Bertha or the friar, or some brutality at that of Sir Wolfgang. The latter had actually recoiled from his little enemy when she advanced on him, and stood perfectly dumb. The swift flow of a woman's indignant eloquence had, for the first time, descended on Sir Wolfgang, and the change astounded him. He knew that every man in the castle knew his story, and whose rights he had usurped; and, since the message from Sir Adelbert, a sudden desire to ingratiate himself with his men, and attach them to him, had seized him. He felt that he might possibly need all his friends ere long. He strove to propitiate Bertha before the rest, saying:

"Don't cry, child. He is not hurt much. The false monk made me angry. He told me a lie, and wanted me to punish you for a fault he said you had committed."

"It is false!" cried Bertha, quivering with anger, and not insensible to her safety in the crowd of spectators, perhaps; "he asked you only 'Had Zimri peace who slew his master?'"

At this question, coming a second time before so many, the castellan turned pale and raised his clinched hand, as if to strike the kneeling girl.

A general roar of anger from behind warned him to desist. He turned furiously round, and met lowering faces from every man in the hall. He quailed before the storm he had raised, and tried to turn it off with a laugh.

"You're too hasty, girl," he said, roughly; "I never meant to hurt him. 'Twas only a jest. See, he revives."

In fact, Father Francis at this juncture did revive and struggle up into a sitting posture, when he leaned his head on his knees and groaned. The castellan saw that he had made a great mistake in his passion. He tried to remedy it the best way he knew.

"I'm sorry to hurt thee, father," he said, awkwardly; "I will send a flagon of good wine to your cell, and you shall be well nursed by lady Bertha. Come, girl, help him away, and you can go where you please, all over the castle. I can't say more than that I'm sorry, can I?"

Father Francis rose feebly and stood, with Bertha supporting him, looking at the knight.

"I think you are, my lord," he said quietly. "Come, my child, let us go."

And without another word he tottered from the room, while a low murmur of sympathy rose up from the crowd outside. Sir Wolfgang turned angrily round and faced them all.

"What are you groaning about, fellows?" he said, sulkily. "Did you never see a broken head before? Get out from here into the castle yard and stables where ye belong. Out, I say!"

The retainers slowly and sullenly dispersed, and Sir Wolfgang returned to his great chair to brood over the news he had received.

"They must die," he muttered; "they know too much, both of them. Who would have thought the little creeping cat had got so much spirit? She looked so much like her mother then. Send to the emperor? She'll find it hard to get there, unless she can fly from the battlements, for all the air she takes shall be there henceforth."

He sat brooding for some time thus, when Red Max entered the hall and approached him.

"What is it, Max?" he asked, peaceably enough now.

"The Baron of Ritterschloss has sent you a letter," said Red Max; "here it is."

"Where's the messenger?" demanded the castellan, taking the letter, which, however, he did not open.

"He's in the court," said Max, "along with a herald."

"Send the herald here," said Sir Wolfgang; "he can read."

Not a man in the castle, except father Francis, could.

The herald soon entered the hall in his green tabard, with the arms of Ritterschloss in gold on the breast.

"Canst read, herald?" demanded Bernstein. "If so, read this. My clerk is sick to-day."

The herald took the folded parchment and read the letter thus:

"To the Baron Wolfgang von Ernst-in, greeting:

"Dear cousin and comrade, we send you herewith the news of the most gentle and joyous tournament that ever was or will be. The new emperor, whom we all thought was going to come down on us and stop our privileges on the Rhine, has turned out to be a good comrade. He has proclaimed a great tilt and tournament at the city of Nuremberg to honor his institution of a new order, the Knights of the Crossicorde. He and his knights will await all comers there, for three days from the last of July, and maintain the lists if they can. I am going, and so is all of our league. We depend on you to tilt against these Crossicordians. They are said to be good knights, and the emperor is Grand Master of the order. Send word if you will come."

"Yours in the league, RITTERSCHLOSS."

"I will be there," said Sir Wolfgang, joyfully. "Tell the baron that I will join him before Nuremberg, and that we will take every lance upon the Rhinebank, if we can get them together in time. I shall have one good eye by that time, and I may meet him."

The herald departed, well pleased with a liberal guerdon from the robber-knight, and Sir Wolfgang went to his chamber to sleep, since he could not hunt or fight till his wound was well.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE MIDNIGHT MARRIAGE.

FATHER FRANCIS lay on his pallet in his little cell, and Bertha watched beside him. The poor friar suffered intense pain in his head, and the young lady was the only creature in the castle that attended him. The men below, so ready to grumble at their master's brutality, were not so ready to help its victim, where help involved trouble.

It was night, and the cell was illuminated by the light of a small swinging lamp, which shone out of a low door on the stone balcony outside, that overlooked the river. Father Francis's cell was in a remote tower, known as the Falcon's tower, built on the summit of the rock where a pair of peregrine falcons had once made their eyrie. It was far from the donjon-keep where the great hall was, and only communicated with the rest of the castle over the battlements of the curtain. Bertha occupied the whole of the lower part of this tower, her sole privilege being that of quiet possession of those rooms. Sir Wolfgang never made his appearance in that part of the castle for some reason or other.

The lowest windows all looked out on a sheer precipice about two hundred feet deep; and the idea of escape on that side was regarded as ridiculous. No one without wings or help could have got down.

In the middle story was father Francis's cell, and here sat Bertha by the pale lamp reading aloud from a breviary to the wounded priest.

"Oh! father," she said at last, laying down the book, "it seems as if our only comfort now was in reading these holy words of the church. Does not your head feel better now?"

"A little, child," he answered, faintly. "Give me to drink, daughter, if you please."

Bertha handed him a cup of water, and he drank with feverish avidity. Just as she was replacing the cup, a sharp tick came on the lintel of the outer door, and down dropped an arrow, with several chips of stone, on the floor of the cell.

Bertha started, and so did father Francis. But the strange part of it was that the girl did not scream, but blushed instead, deep crimson.

"I knew he would come," she murmured, softly, as she looked at the arrow on the floor. A spiral strip of white parchment seemed to be wound around it from heel to point.

"Who—who has come?" asked the friar, nervously.

"Sir Adelbert," she answered, her whole face glowing; "I knew it was he. Max Stoffler has told him of my tower, and he is below to rescue me."

How can that be, daughter?" said the priest, wonderingly; "no human being could climb up the face of that rock."

"There is a legend," said Bertha, gayly, taking up the arrow and unrolling the parchment as she spoke, "that once on a time this castle had a captive princess, and that the first Rudolph von Falkenstein climbed from below to the falcon's nest, and shot up an arrow to the lady's window— It is he! It is he!" she broke off wildly, kissing the precious letter. "We shall be free yet."

She held the parchment to the lamp. It was a long, slender strip written in red ink. She read aloud:

"LADY BERTHA VON FALKENSTEIN—The emperor has heard of your wrongs, and has sent me to avenge them. Look from the lower window."

"ADELBERT."

"Good-by, father," said the girl, gayly; "I will tell you all about it when I come back."

"But, daughter," objected the priest, urged by his conscience, "your spiritual adviser ought to be present at your interview with a strange youth."

"Oh, father," she said, coaxingly, "remember your poor head. It is not safe for you to move about. Besides, he cannot get in, you know."

"The first Rudolph von Falkenstein got in, did he not," said the priest, dryly, "and carried off the princess?"

"Yes, father," she admitted with a burning blush; "but then he brought up a rope-ladder, and Sir Adelbert would not do anything like that, you know. Oh, father, don't try to move. You'll hurt your poor head. If he comes in I'll bring him up. Indeed I will. And your health is the first thing you know, father."

The priest smiled faintly.

"Go, my daughter," he said; "I will trust the honor of the castle with you. Go, and return quickly."

Bertha was out of the room like a flash. Brought up in perfect innocence by the friar as she had been, she could not account to herself for her anxiety to hold this same interview without witnesses. She only knew that she had never seen any one half as handsome as Sir Adelbert, and that he had come as he had promised.

She hurried down the winding stone steps with nervous haste, ran to the lower window and looked out. This window, like the rest, was down to the floor, and had a stone balcony outside, from which Bertha leaned, the rising moon shining full on her beautiful head. She gazed eagerly down the precipice.

It was yet in deep shadow from the opposite mountains, but the light was slowly creeping down its rugged face, lighting up the crevices.

The foundations of the tower were cut out of the living rock, and not more than thirty feet below there was a projecting ledge that jutted out from the precipice just like a bracket or console, the famous platform of the old falcon's nest, now long deserted.

As Bertha leaned over, a voice came up to her out of the darkness, a well-remembered voice.

"St!" it said; "Lady Bertha, is that you?"

"Yes, my lord," she almost whispered back. "Be careful, for the love of Heaven, sir knight. Do not fall."

"Fear not," answered the voice of Sir Adelbert; "I am safe here. I came up by Sir Rudolph's Ladder, and, my faith, 'tis a perilous road in the dark, but I shall go back safe enough."

"But you will be discovered," said Bertha, alarmed.

"Fear not," he answered again. "The hall of the donjon is full of revelers, and by this time they are all well drunk. Besides, we are out of sight of all parts of the castle save only this tower."

"Oh! sir knight," said Bertha, softly; "how glad I am that you came at last."

"I have come to rescue you, sweet lady," said the voice below; "and if you will follow my directions, you shall see the means of safety left with you this night. Are you alone in the tower?"

"Only father Francis is here," she answered— "my good confessor. He is up-stairs, hurt sorely by the brutal knight of the castle."

"I will see him," said Sir Adelbert, promptly. "Max, send up the cord."

And here as the moonlight gradually reached the falcon's nest, Bertha saw a dark figure close to that of the knight, while below both rushed the dark river just above the rapids.

The second man was short and broad, and the girl saw him bend a bow and fit to it an arrow. He gently shot up this arrow so that it fell into the little balcony beside her, and Bertha perceived a round ball tied on the point. It proved to be a ball of string.

"Unwind the string," said Sir Adelbert, in a low tone; "drop the end over."

Bertha obeyed with alacrity. The romance and excitement of an escape were begun already. Sir Adelbert fastened a heavier cord to the string and bade her draw up. At the end of the string was a strong hook.

"Place the hook over the balustrade," said the knight; and in a moment more he was climbing rapidly up to the window.

Now Bertha fluttered and trembled as the active figure vaulted into the balcony, and dropped on one knee at her feet.

"Sweet lady," said Sir Adelbert; "here in the face of Heaven and the eternal stars hear me

swear never to rest till Falkenstein has regained its true mistress, and Adelbert is admitted as her knight. Tell me, Lady Bertha, dearest, sweetest, and best, shall the second who has climbed to the falcon's nest have the luck of the first Rudolph, or have I climbed in vain?"

Poor little Bertha fluttered and trembled with some strange feeling, and yet smiled all the while.

"I—I don't understand—" she faltered, "what you mean."

Which was true. The child did not understand herself and her own feelings, much less another's.

"I mean that I love you," said the soft, deep voice of Sir Adelbert; "that I loved you from the moment I saw you at the lattice. Will Lady Bertha take me for her knight, to fight for her against all the world?"

"Oh! Sir Adelbert! How can you ask?" sighed the poor child, in a tone of almost painful delight. "You are so good, so noble, so brave. Can you love, indeed, a poor little deserted maid like me?"

"The violet hides among the leaves, and the skylark soars to the sun," said Sir Adelbert; "but the free bird comes back to the modest flower, and loves it better than the gaudy dandelion. I am thy knight, Bertha, is't not so?"

"Oh! yes, my lord," she said, faintly.

"Call me not my lord," said Sir Adelbert, still kneeling at her feet. "Think only that you are the princess in prison, and I am Rudolph come to save you. Call me Rudolph, nay, if you will, dear Rudolph."

He knelt there in the full light of the moon, and she stood before him. Neither touched the other, so much as with the tips of the fingers, but gazed into each other's eyes. Both his hands were clasped together, and hers were up, half hiding her beaming face. Shy, proud, delicate, and yet tender and loving, this virgin soul was not frightened by so much as a look of passion from this knight of courtesy. He knelt as he might at a shrine. She stood, full of sweet shame and delicious fears, vague and formless, at being thus adored. She did not hear the soft step of friar Francis, who had heard the sound of voices, and stolen down stairs, full of fears for his innocent charge. The good friar stood in the shadow of the door, a silent and interested spectator of the whole scene.

"Rudolph! ah! dear Rudolph!" sobbed Bertha, and burst into tears, she knew not why. Still the knight did not offer to approach her. He rose to his feet, and said, quietly:

"It is enough, sweet lady. Henceforth I am Rudolph to you, and you are my princess forever and ever. Where is the good father Francis?"

The friar stepped forward out of the shadow.

"He is here, sir knight," he said, in a tone of deep feeling; "he has seen what he feared never to see again, a true knight, whose love is as pure as his own brave heart. Kneel down, sir knight, that I may bless thee."

Sir Adelbert bowed his lofty head before the barefooted friar, with the same simplicity that distinguished his every movement.

"May the blessing of God be on thee, sir knight," said the friar, lifting trembling hands. "May he give thee thy heart's desire, and send us more knights like thee, with the cross of Christ in their hearts, and the courage of the true knight to fight for that cross forever."

"AMEN!" said Sir Adelbert, in so deep and fervent a tone that the priest started. "The cross in the heart, the heart under the cross, God send it success!"

Then he rose to his feet and turned to Bertha. For the first time he took her by the hand. The deep solemnity of the priest's address had awed the young girl into forgetfulness of her emotions before. Sir Adelbert addressed her with earnest gravity now, without abating the melodious softness of voice and manner he had been using.

"Bertha," he said, "before God and his priest I ask thee to wed me to-night, that I may be able to take thee from here without so much as a speck on that fair fame of thine. Lady Bertha, will you wed me?"

"Yes, Rudolph," she answered, gently; "you know I will."

"Father Francis," said the knight, turning to him, "will you wed two lovers who wish to be one forever?"

"Right gladly," said the father, heartily. "Kneel down, my children, and not all the power of the empire can sunder you when I shall have spoken the words."

And then, in the dark turret chamber above the Falcon's Nest, where the first Rudolph of Falkenstein won his bride, the knight and the lady were made one by the priest of God.

Then, for the first time, Sir Adelbert folded his bride in his arms, and Bertha thrilled to the first kiss her innocent lips had ever received since her old nurse had died, ten years before.

"And now, father," said Sir Adelbert, gravely, "I am about to commit my wife to your charge for a few days. I shall leave you both the means of escape when I go, and I shall return every night at the same hour. I have men within this castle who keep me informed of all that goes on, or I should not leave you thus. If any danger comes toward you, I shall know of it, and be there to avert it from you; but, for the present, all I have to say is, keep in the tower and do not descend to the donjon save for food."

"There is no need, my lord," said the friar. "It has been the custom of Sir Wolfgang to send all food hither from the buttery three times a day. He has not dared to let the lady Bertha be seen at all hours in the donjon hall. There are too many of the old Falkenstein retainers left among his crew of thieves. He has tried all arts short of force to keep us both here."

"Good!" said the knight. "Obey him then for the present. The time will come soon when Wolfgang shall be hung on the very oak trees he has stolen. But till then we must be cautious. My Bertha! Dost think thou'll dare to have me leave thee thus, my new-wed bride, and yet not murmur?"

He folded her in his arms, and looked down with pitying tenderness on the trembling girl.

"Whatever you say, my lord, that will I do," she answered bravely. "You are wise, and know best."

He kissed her brow gently.

"That's my brave Bertha," he said; "and now listen. I am going to leave thee to-night, little bride. But I will show thee how to escape if so be that need comes. From the Falcon's Nest to the ground is a ladder of wire, so fine that it can not be seen, strong enough to hold twenty men. Keep the rope that I came up by, and hide it in your room here. If need be, let yourself down to the Falcon's Nest, and thence you will find the way easy to the little shore of pebbles under the cliff. They think here that the river below is impassable, but you will find that it is not. Under a rock you will find a little boat, invisible from above, and nobody ever goes down to the water's edge here. The beach I speak of is only a little bay as it were, sheltered by jutting points. The boat runs on a rope all across the river. Pull on the rope and you will go across easily, and be in the woods on the other side. Then cast loose the rope, abandon the boat, and follow the first path you see before you. It will lead you to friends who will protect you."

Bertha listened attentively.

"Is that all, my lord?" she asked timidly. "Will you go, and not even tell your wife your real name?"

Sir Adelbert paused.

"Bertha," he said, gravely, "do you mistrust me? Can you not leave me to tell that at the proper moment?"

He looked at her sadly. She hid her face in his bosom and faltered:

"Yes, my lord—but—I ought to know—it is not right that I should not know who my husband is."

"Listen, Bertha," he said; "I have a reason for not telling that name here and yet. But to the good father I will whisper it, under the seal of the holy church. To know it now, before the end, would but make thee miserable. But in good time thou shalt. Will not my princess trust her Rudolph?"

"Well then, whisper it to father Francis," said Bertha, pouting a little, "since you won't trust me to keep the secret."

"I will," said Sir Adelbert, smiling; "and father Francis, who has doubtless read of it in his old studies, shall tell you the story of the Princess Psyche who feared to trust her husband long ago, and who paid for it dearly. Father Francis, come hither."

And the tall knight bent down and whispered a few words in the friar's ear. Father Francis gave a slight start and surveyed the other with astonishment.

"My lord," he said, respectfully, "your commands shall be obeyed. I will watch over the lady Bertha unceasingly."

Sir Adelbert turned and folded his young wife in his arms, kissing her fondly.

"Farewell, sweetheart," he said; "remember that I am near thee always. Think of me, and love me, Bertha sweet. And trust thy Rudolph, princess mine."

She clung to him, weeping a moment. The

next he had vaulted out of the window, and was descending the rope rapidly to the Falcon's Nest.

He kissed his hand in farewell from thence, and Bertha watched the two figures descending the precipice by the invisible ladder to the stream below.

CHAPTER IX.

THE KNIGHTS OF THE CROSSICORDE.

THE city of Nuremberg was crowded with people from all parts of Germany to celebrate the grand tournament in honor of the Knights of the Crossicorde, proclaimed by the emperor, Rudolph of Hapsburg.

The long interregnum of blood which had brooded over Germany for nineteen years, since the death of the good emperor Conrad IV., was ended at last, and the Count of Hapsburg had been unanimously elected emperor a year before.

But, during the interregnum, disorder had risen to a vast height in the once happy empire. Nowhere had rapine and license come out so boldly and wickedly as among the Robber Knights of the Rhine, and the emperor had been powerless to effect anything against their formidable league.

Apparently he had given up the attempt in despair, for to this tournament he had sent special invitations among all the knights of the empire without distinction, and the men of the Rhine League were among the first to come to the city of Nuremberg.

It was the morning of the tournament. At least a thousand barons, margraves, dukes and princes were assembled at Nuremberg, or encamped around the walls in the meadows.

The order of the Holy Crossicorde was to be instituted by the emperor, and every one wanted to know what the Crossicorde was, and who were the knights. At present all was a mystery, but the church of St. Lawrence had been appointed for the installation, and the Knights of the Crossicorde were to tilt against all comers afterward.

Of other knights there was an immense crowd, and at least twenty thousand men at arms encamped in the meadows outside.

The knight of Ernstein, with a black patch hiding his sightless left eye, now nearly healed, had come to the town as he had promised, with his train of spears, and along with his neighbor Ritterschloss.

All the knights of the Rhine League were encamped near each other, and around them were the knights of Bohemia, Franconia, Austria and others, who were closely attached to the new emperor.

At last, at ten in the forenoon, the bells clanged out merrily on the summer air, and the nobles began to stream toward the great church of St. Lawrence.

The people were compelled to stand outside, for the building would not hold such a crowd, and they formed a great lane to the door of the church, and watched the nobles enter.

All were magnificently dressed, and most were armed, ready for the tournament. A great eagerness was felt to see the vaunted Knights of the Crossicorde, and many a fierce ritter had taken his oath to overthrow them or die in the attempt.

So they stalked with a great clash into the church and waited, standing on the stone pavement, for the coming of the procession. There were no seats. Every one stood.

At last the great organ in the choir burst forth into a triumphant flood of sound, and the priests and acolytes entered, chanting the *Introit*.

There was a great hush in the church, every one straining their necks to see what came next. Then there was a glitter and clash of steel, and a file of armed figures emerged from the vestry door, and advanced to the center of the chancel, where they stood in front of the altar, with their backs to the people.

There was just thirteen figures all told, their armor exactly alike, and bright like silver. Every visor was down, and they wore no surcoats, so that there was nothing to indicate which was which. They stood in a line, the central knight towering several inches above his companions, and bearing in his right hand a folded banner, his only mark of distinction. Not one wore any offensive weapon yet, but a heap of swords lay in front of the altar.

The hush of suspense in the congregation was almost painful, as these mysterious figures, with closed visors, stalked solemnly out to the front of the altar. The swell of the organ slowly subsided, the song died softly away, and

the voice of the Bishop of Nuremberg was heard chanting the "Orate, fratres."

The whole assembly sunk down on their knees, while the bishop uttered a long prayer in Latin for the new knights of the Crossicorde, and the mass was duly chanted and sung. Then came the grand ceremony of the installation.

The folded banner was unrolled for the first time, and the tall knight in white armor waved it in full sight of the congregation, whom he dressed with a loud, hollow voice, that rung through the bars of the closed visor like one from the grave.

"Men of Germany," he said, "knights and barons! behold the banner of the Crossicorde! It is first unfolded in the house of God. Pray that it may float in the breeze of battle till every false knight is laid low, and every knight honors his vow as in the days of our fathers!"

A deep "AMEN!" came from the six silent figures on either side, low, hollow, and sepulchral.

The curious nobles looked at the banner and then at one another. It bore in the middle, on a simple white field, a crimson heart, on which was graven a golden cross, and around the heart ran the Latin motto: "Crux in Corde" (the cross in the heart). That was all.

"What does it mean?" said one to the other. "The cross in the heart? What mummery is this?"

But now the bishop advanced and took the banner in his hand, while he audibly repeated in German:

"Blessed be the banner of the Crossicorde, with all the blessings the church can bestow on it! May it shine in the van of the army of truth and justice, and wave over the grave of oppression and robbery. The holy Church blesses it, and calls on her knights to defend it."

Immediately the whole group of knights, as if at a signal, rushed into a circle around the bishop, who held it up.

"Call us, father," echoed the deep murmur from between the bars of the helmets.

The bishop called out in a loud voice:

"Rudolph of Hapsburg, Emperor of Germany, take thou the banner of the Crossicorde, and be thou Grand Master!"

The tall knight who had unrolled the banner sprung up, amid a tempest of shouts from the congregation, who began to realize who he was.

"Hoch! Hoch!" they shouted: "Hoch lebe der Kaiser!"

The emperor, for it was himself, waved the banner in the air and pronounced, after the bishop, the oath:

"I, Rudolph of Hapsburg, Emperor of Germany, and Grand Master of the Crossicorde, accept the trust of the banner as from God. I swear before HIS high altar to keep the cross in my heart, my heart under the cross, to fight against all oppressors, and to rest not from the struggle till the poorest man in Germany can walk alone, unarmed, from the North Sea to the Alps, with none to make him afraid. I swear to hold my word sacred as an oath, to respect all women in memory of Christ's Mother; to defend the cause of the fatherless and oppressed; to be courteous to high and low alike, and to fight manfully for the holy Crossicorde while life me lasts."

He knelt before the bishop, who blessed him. Then he rose to his feet and summoned by name his fellow knights.

"Karl, Margrave of Wurtemburg; Franz, Duke of Bohemia; Friedrich, of Franconia; Max, of Bavaria; Ludwig, of Baden; Heinrich, of Cassel; Moritz, of Saxony; Wilhelm, of Brandenburg; Rudolph, of Swabia; Conrad, of Austria; George, of Hungary; Andreas, of Tyrol, come to the defense of the banner."

Each knight, as his name was called, stood up and laid a hand on the banner-staff which was closed in a circle of steel. As if with one voice the twelve knights of the Crossicorde pronounced the oath:

"We swear to defend the holy Crossicorde. Cross in Heart, Heart under Cross, we swear to fight to the death; to honor our word as an oath, to respect all women for the sake of Christ's Mother; to love only one, and to keep to her only. God bless the Crossicorde."

Then each knight sprung to the foot of the altar, caught up a sword, and in a moment more twelve bright blades flashed around the banner.

"In the name of God and the Holy Virgin!" cried the deep voice of the emperor, "the Crossicorde is displayed! Death to all false knights!"

And bearing the banner aloft in his left hand, he drew his sword with the right, and marched down the central aisle of the great church, followed by the knights in pairs.

"God bless the Crossicorde!" cried the voice

of the old bishop as they went, and the multitude of nobles caught the infection.

There was a clash of arms under the lofty vaults, and the whole assembly echoed the shout:

"God bless the Crossicorde!"

And so, out into the sunlight passed the new knights, with no costly collar or chain to mark their order. Only the white banner above, and the cross in the heart below.

And the nobles streamed after.

But spite of the shout in the church there was great difference of opinion among these same nobles.

"What think you of this new idea of our emperor?" grumbled old Wolfgang to his friend Ritterschloss.

The veteran robber shook his head.

"It looks bad," he said, in a low tone. "These new knights are all powerful princes, every one of them. If they carry out their oath, they may make it hot for us. We were fools to elect that count of Hapsburg emperor. I was told that he was a mere hunter, a fellow that cared only for horse and hound. But he is a deep schemer, after all. We must set our houses in order."

"Ay," said Wolfgang, sulkily, "but not without an effort to win first."

"What do you mean?" asked Ritterschloss.

"This," said the robber knight, earnestly. "They tilt to-day against all comers. They are thirteen. We have nearly sixty knights in our league. Let us challenge them all together, thirteen at a time, and give them no rest till they have run three courses with each set. That will be twelve courses apiece. They must some of them fall under it, and we shall have some men left still. I tell you, baron, these men must be killed, or our hold on the Rhine will not be for long."

"You say true," said Ritterschloss, thoughtfully. "We must see about it at once."

The two knights pursued their way to their horses, and rode out toward the camp of the Rhine League, between which and the city the lists were pitched.

On their way thither they were impeded by the immense concourse of people thronging to the lists, a-horseback and a-foot. Old Ernstein cursed and grumbled but could not go any faster, for there were many ladies in the crowd, and the effect of the institution of the Crossicorde was already apparent, in the courtesy shown them by all.

As they went on, a cry arose behind them of—

"Clear the way there!"

Wolfgang looked back, and beheld a richly decorated litter, with four white horses bearing it, come at a rapid pace through the crowd, and pass by them on its way to the lists.

"Who's that?" he asked, of a countryman trudging behind him.

"That's her blessed highness, the empress," answered the man, with a grin; "don't you know that?"

"No, fool," said the knight, gruffly; "how should I?"

"They say she's the most beautiful creature ever was seen," said the man, grinning again; "and only just married."

Sir Wolfgang touched his horse with the spur, as he saw an opening in the crowd, and galloped forward, feeling no particular interest in the subject. It was recalled to his memory by Ritterschloss, who said, thoughtfully:

"I had always heard the new emperor was a bachelor like you, Wolfgang. He has married suddenly. By-the-bye, how is that pretty damsel that I have sometimes seen at your castle? Did you not bring her to see the tournament?"

"No," said Wolfgang, sulkily; "she's not the sort of girl to like them. She'd rather mope in her old tower, with no one but father Francis for company. So I left her there, under guard, to look at the rapids."

"You're a fool, Ernstein," said his companion, tersely. "We all know who the girl is. Why don't you marry her and have done with it? Then you would hold the lands of Falkenstein by as good right as any in Germany. As it is, if she were to get out and marry some enemy of yours, he might claim her lands from the emperor, and get help to drive you out."

"There's truth in every word of it," said Sir Wolfgang; "and I only wonder I've never thought of it before. I'll do it as soon as I get home, by heavens!"

But by this time they had neared the lists and ridden into the camp of the Rhine League. Every knight was seeing to his equipments, and the clank of armorers' hammers was incessant.

There was very little difficulty in getting the knights together in Sir Wolfgang's tent, and as little in inducing them to accede to the treacherous plan.

When the lists were opened, and the great banner of the Crossicorde was seen, standing in front of the emperor's marquee, thirteen knights of the Rhineland splendidly armed and mounted, rode into the barriers the very first, with a herald in front, who announced that Sir Wolfgang, Baron of Ernstein, and twelve companions would run three courses with sharp lances with the Crossicordians.

A shout of delight went up from the multitude at such a gallant opening.

In the midst of it, in rode the Emperor Rudolph on a bright red-roan charger, followed by his twelve knights, all fully armed and equipped for fight.

CHAPTER X.

THE LISTS.

THE Crossicordians were all armed alike in bright steel that shone like silver, unrelieved by any ornament. Only on the breast-plate, just over the heart, was a small gold cross, inclosed in a heart-shaped plate of crimson coral.

All of the thirteen were strong and well-built men, the emperor alone being slender in proportion to his height. But his form was distinguished by a supple grace, that earned him a shout of applause, as he rode in with his lance up.

The shields of all thirteen were heart-shaped and crimson, bearing the same gold cross, with the motto around it, *Crux in Corde*.

But little time was wasted in preliminaries. There was no telling the different knights from one another, as all had visors down and rode the same colored horses.

Sir Wolfgang took his post in the center of the Rhineland line, spurred his great black charger to the fray, and away went the two lines like thunderbolts.

They met in the center of the lists like a tempest, with a tremendous shock and clatter of arms. Lances went to splinters with a crash, the dust rose in a cloud, and for a moment all was confusion.

When the thin dust cleared away, five of the knights of the Rhineland lay on the earth, horse and all, and one more hung over the bow of his saddle, with the broken shaft of a lance protruding from his pierced breastplate.

Only seven of the thirteen had parted fairly, and the knights of the Crossicorde were all un-hurt.

Sir Wolfgang Von Ernstein had crossed lances with the emperor. He was the roughest joustier of the Rhineland, and had expected an easy victory over the slight-framed Rudolph of Hapsburg.

But almost in the moment of meeting, the Grand Master of the Crossicorde bent down low over his saddle-bow, so as to identify his own strength with that of the horse, and offer the utmost possible resistance. He bowed down as he leveled his own lance at Ernstein's broad breast, and sent the tough spear to splinters there.

The lance of the robber-knight struck the heart-shaped shield in the center, and then the strong knight of Ernstein, for the first time in his life, bent back in his saddle under the blow of Rudolph, and lost both stirrups.

The emperor was only forced upright from his low bow, and the two lines parted. Ernstein was savage and sore. He had discovered one thing, that the horses of the Crossicordian party were far superior to the heavy, clumsy Flanders chargers he and his friends rode.

There seemed to be a life, vigor and strength in them that was astonishing.

He returned to his post, took a second lance, and prepared to run the second course.

Six of the Crossicordians remained afoot, leaning on their lances. Their adversaries had not been able to come to time, and one of them was dying.

The other seven darted forward, Rudolph of Hapsburg in the center. His red-roan charger flew out a spear's length in front of the rest, as he dashed upon Sir Wolfgang.

The impetus of his charge was so much swifter than the others that he bore him down, horse and all, with the shock of a battering-ram, and Wolfgang of Ernstein rolled over in the dirt under his fallen steed, unhorsed for the first time in his life.

The rest acquitted themselves equally well, and a buzz of admiration went round the lists.

Only a single robber-knight remained mounted, and his corslet was pierced with a lance-head.

"Such rough jousters I never saw before," said a grizzled noble who sat on an upper seat, to his son, a young squire. "Surely the emperor has found the twelve best knights of all the land. Those Rhinelanders are no fools at the work, but the men of the Crossicorde treat them like children. Heyday! What's this? More already? That is not fair. Fresh men on tired ones, by St. Rudolph!"

His exclamation was elicited by the sight of thirteen fresh knights, who rode into the ring almost ere the first *melee* was finished, and threw a number of gauntlets right at the faces of the Crossicordian knights.

A groan of disapprobation burst from the crowd all round the lists at the obvious unfairness of the insult. The gauntlet thrown was the peremptory challenge to instant combat, that could not be refused.

Nor did the Crossicordians refuse it. To a man they waved the broken stumps of their lances, and retired to the end of the lists, to renew the charge.

But a new surprise was in store for the people.

As the knights of the Crossicorde rode back, a number of grooms came running out, leading thirteen fresh horses, this time all black, but equally fine in breed, with an appearance of blood about them that the heavy war-horse of the middle ages seldom showed.

The change was effected in a moment. The next, all close together, on the fresh, eager horses, the knights of the Crossicorde swept down on the second set of Rhinelanders with a tempest of rushing hoofs. They kept in a compact body, wedged close together, and burst through the other's scattered line like chaff. Eight of the enemy were hurled from their saddles like stones from slings by the superior swiftness of the emperor's horses, and the rest declined to tilt a second course.

Old Wolfgang, who had but just recovered his senses from the rude shock he had received, beheld thirteen more of his comrades ready at the gate, but hesitating.

"Go in, fools," he cried, roughly to one; "they cannot last forever."

"They'll last my time, I think," responded the other, in a rueful tone; "they ride like devils, these men. And if you touch one, you touch all."

However, the third set rode in, and again challenged the emperor's party to peremptory combat.

It was instantly accepted, amid a confused tumult of shouts of applause and hisses.

A third time fresh horses were brought out, this time all dapple grays, and again the two parties met in shock. Each time that the Crossicordians changed horses, the animals seemed to be swifter and better, as they needed to be, to counteract the weariness of the men.

They rode as rapidly as ever, but their lances seemed to be held with less vigor, for although they met fairly, only one of the Rhineland knights was unhorsed. It was the one opposed to the emperor.

Sir Wolfgang rubbed his hands as he saw his friends part fairly with their opponents, and noticed that two of the Crossicordian lances had slipped from their aim and remained unbroken.

"Once more, my bullies," he muttered; "once more at them, and they may begin to fall too."

But he was destined to be disappointed. Both parties rested for two minutes between the courses, when the emperor's knights were served with wine.

As the trumpet sounded the charge once more, they all started with fresh vigor, on horses just warmed to their work, and bore down the Rhinelanders to a man with their impetuous charge, not a single one escaping discomfiture.

Sir Wolfgang ground his teeth with a bitter curse at his luck, which was hardly out of his lips, when a perfect yell of execration went up from the crowded lists.

Thirteen fresh knights galloped into the lists, and challenged the victors to fight a *l'outrance*, with spear, sword and battle-ax.

There was a pause among the twelve Crossicordians in front. Their Grand Master had not joined in the last course, but now came galloping up.

"What would ye, gentlemen?" he asked impudently, of the strangers.

"Mortal combat, ahorse and afoot," replied the leader of the enemy through the bars of his helmet.

"NO! NO!" came a great shout from the crowd outside: "ENOUGH! ENOUGH!"

The knights of the Rhineland appeared to be quite unmoved by the popular clamor. They pressed threateningly on the weary Crossicordians, and seemed as if they were about to attack them without waiting.

Lances were couched, and another course seemed to be inevitable, when an interruption occurred that the haughty knights had not counted on.

The lists suddenly opened at the further end, and into the green inclosure rode thirteen other knights, with the banner of Bavaria in front. The leader was a handsome young knight, with his visor up, who rode full speed and cried out:

"God bless the Crossicorde! We will fight you, dogs of the Rhineland!"

The Robber Knights drew back.

"You are not a Crossicordian, Sir Knight," said the leader; "our quarrel is with them, not you."

"We are all of the Crossicorde now," said the young knight, fiercely; "our duke is here, and you strive to kill him by treachery, coward and slave!"

As he spoke, he brought down the shaft of his lance on the other's helmet, with a force that splintered the staff.

In a moment more his party had charged the treacherous knights of the Rhineland, amid shouts from the audience of:

"Kill the dogs! God bless the Crossicorde. Down with them!"

A general row seemed inevitable, when the loud voice of the Emperor Rudolph enforced silence. He cleft his way through the press, swinging his battle-ax to and fro.

"Hold your hands!" he shouted. "Do ye know that the emperor is here, rebels? Back to your places! Drop your weapons, every one of you! The lists are closed for the day."

Instantly the Bavarians shrunk back as if ashamed, and the knights of the Rhineland, seeing that, if they presumed too far, the odds might be heavily against them, were content to retire for the day, which they did in sullen silence.

When the herald proclaimed the lists closed till the next day, there was a universal shout of joy at the decision.

When he further proclaimed that all present, gentle and simple, were invited to the evening's feast, the shouts redoubled.

CHAPTER XI.

THE FEAST.

THERE was no place in quaint old Nuremberg within walls, large enough to contain the tables for such a feast as the emperor was giving. Ten thousand nobles, knights, and squires, besides as many peasants from the country and twice as many men at arms, were to be feasted at the expense of the munificent Rudolph, and the great fountain in the market-place was to run with wine.

The night was clear, fine, and starlit, warm and pleasant. What more simple than to spread the tables in the open air? The problem was thus solved at all events. In the market-place a great booth had been erected in which were spread the tables for dukes, margraves, counts, barons, and knights who hold castles only, in number about five hundred. The Rhineland knights, without exception, were there, and at the upper end of the central table was the chair of the emperor himself, at present vacant.

But the twelve Knights of the Crossicorde, who had fought so valiantly by his side that morning, were ranged on each side of the throne, no longer hidden in armor with closed visors, but all dressed alike in spotless white, with the emblem of the order embroidered on the breast.

They were all well-known princes, the most powerful in the Empire, especially the Duke of Bavaria, and it was evident that each carried a party with him.

The Rhineland Leaguers found themselves alone, without a friend to lean on in the great assembly. And yet they were treated on all hands with the most distinguished courtesy, and seemed to have nothing to fear.

There were many comments among the guests on the emperor's absence from his seat. Strange as it may seem, there were hardly twenty men in that assembly who were acquainted with Rudolph's person, except as seen in armor with closed visor. The new emperor had lived the most retired life since his election, and what his face was like no one knew, least of all the Rhineland knights, not one of whom knew him except by report.

But a substitute was soon found to occupy his place. The chancellor of the empire, nu-

merously attended, and carrying on a cushion the crown and scepter of the successor of Charlemagne, made his appearance to proclaim that the feast was opened.

"It is the emperor's pleasure to see and not be seen to-night," he said. "He sends the Iron Crown to preside over ye all, and bids you good cheer. Bring on the dishes."

The crowds of servants, with every delicacy of the age, made haste to appease the disappointment of the guests by filling their stomachs, and soon the feast rose high, and the wine flowed freely.

The booth, all made of green fir branches, was lighted with a profusion of torches and candles, which cast a broad glare of light over the splendid dresses of the revelers. Through the open arches all round one could see the market-place crowded with heads, where a sea of flaring torches sparkled and glittered behind and around the great fountain.

The buzz of voices was incessant, and a rude chorus, softened by the distance, borne on the night-breeze from some far-off group of feasters.

"By St. Wolfgang!" said old Ernstein, admiringly to his neighbor Ritterschloss, "though I love not this young emperor of ours, (who is too proud to let us see his face, forsooth), I must admit that he plays his part well to-night. This feast will cost him a hundred thousand thalers at the least."

Ritterschloss was moody. He had more thought than his companions in arms.

"Hark ye," he said, in a low tone to old Wolfgang; "you only think of the feast and the cost. I think of something else."

"What?" demanded the castellan.

"I think this; *What are these Crossicordians going to do?* Mark them, Ernstein. They sit there all in white. Every man is a prince, and the poorest can muster five hundred lances. We have seen them to-day how they cling together, and what manner of men they are. Suppose they try to clear away our castles from the Rhinebank, where shall we be when the time comes, and when will it come?"

Sir Wolfgang started and seemed to reflect. Suddenly the message of Sir Adelbert recurred to his memory.

"Say, Ritterschloss," he eagerly asked the other, "heard you ever such a name as Adelbert among the princes of the empire?"

"Adelbert?" repeated the other, musingly: "there is Adelbert of Bohemia, brother to the duke Friedrich. He is abbot of the monastery of Wien. Then there is—"

"No," interrupted Wolfgang, starting half up, as he spoke with his remaining eye riveted on one of the arches, "not that. There he is now, by the furies! Who is that tall young knight now entering?"

Ritterschloss glanced in the direction indicated, and beheld a remarkably tall and graceful young knight dressed in white and blue velvet, with a white cloak carelessly drooped from his left shoulder, advancing from the foot of the table to where they sat. The stranger had lovely golden hair, in long ringlets, and was none other than our old friend Sir Adelbert.

Sir Wolfgang glared from his single eye at the handsome debonair stranger, and involuntarily felt for his sword. He remembered that he had left it behind him, in common with the rest. No one wore anything at a feast but the dagger with which they carved their food, using fingers for forks.*

The robber knight clinched his hand on his own poinard, when Ritterschloss restrained him.

"What would you do, Ernstein?" he said; "draw on a man at the emperor's feast? Twill be petty treason, and they'll cut thy hand off, man."

The furious baron was checked by this sensible remark, and sat down again, the veins swelling in his forehead, and breathing hard. Sir Adelbert advanced calmly up the passage between the tables, and paused by the two knights of the Rhineland.

"Sir knight," he said gently, to Ernstein, "you seem to look at me in a strange manner."

"I have cause," said the other savagely, in a suppressed voice.

The buzz of talk around them prevented them from being noticed.

"What cause?" demanded Sir Adelbert, calmly.

*Forks were invented by an Italian cardinal at the end of the fourteenth century. Many people opposed them at first, as a despising of the gifts of God, who made the fingers to be used.

"I owe you this," said Sir Wolfgang, grimly, pointing to his sightless eye; "and were it not that we are at the emperor's feast, I would stab thee now, nameless clown that thou art."

Sir Adelbert kept his temper admirably now. Moreover there was a total absence of the mocking, sarcastic tone he had assumed to Ernstein when his own life was in imminent danger. He was the very soul of gentle and forbearing courtesy now.

"Sir knight," he said, politely, "you must be sensible that I was in imminent danger of my life when I cast that spear. You, armed *cap-a-pie*, drew sword on a naked man, and he defended himself. What else could he do?"

Sir Wolfgang was silenced for a moment. He glanced sullenly at the other, and said:

"Well, well; my turn will come yet, and I'll put you where you'll never strike another blow."

"Say you so?" said Sir Adelbert, quietly. "If I come to the meadow in front of Falkenstein, will you break a lance to avenge your wrongs?"

"I know no Falkenstein," said Sir Wolfgang, fiercely. "I am Wolfgang of Ernstein, and I fight no nameless man, who may not be even noble, for all I know."

Sir Adelbert looked at the other with a smile. The temptation to a sarcasm was very strong, but he resisted it. The only person that heard their conversation was Ritterschloss, and he did not wish to attract attention.

"Sir Wolfgang," he said, "I have promised to come to Falkenstein before the leaves are brown, to give back the Lady Bertha her lands. I wish to give you a chance to act fairly, and die in harness. When I come it will not be as a nameless man, but my name shall you never hear from me save through the bars of the close helmet, before I set my lance in rest."

Sir Wolfgang looked at the young knight in perplexity. Sir Adelbert's manner was grave and courteous, but there was a peculiar solemnity in his voice that insensibly awed the other.

"I'm not the man to refuse a fair fight to the devil himself," he said, sullenly. "If so be ye come to Ernstein, and ye be a gentleman, I will break not one but fifty lances, if ye please, on ye, and fight ye to the utterance with sword and battle-ax."

"I will be there," said Sir Adelbert, with a courteous bow. "Ye wear the spurs of knighthood now, Sir Wolfgang, and ye shall have the rights of a knight if ye can defend them. But woe unto you, Wolfgang of Ernstein, if the lance fail your hand and you be worsted. Justice shall be done then to the uttermost; and let the knights of the Rhinebank beware when they see the Crossed Heart coming through the wilds of the Black Forest."

He looked steadily in turn at both the robber knights, and then turned round and walked out of the booth, where he was lost in the crowd.

Ritterschloss called to a servant who was hurrying by:

"Who's yon tall knight in the white cloak, with his back turned, going out?" he asked, rapidly.

"How can I tell, sir knight?" said the man, aghast; "out of five thousand knights, I know not twenty, and this one has his back turned."

The baron gave an impatient curse, and rushed from the booth. The crowd outside was growing loud and merry, and the torches glared on many a familiar face, but the graceful form of Sir Adelbert was nowhere to be seen. He had vanished like a spirit. Ritterschloss returned to the feast, glum and disappointed.

CHAPTER XII.

THE YOUNG WIFE.

If the baron had been a little quicker, he might have solved the mystery of Sir Adelbert's disappearance.

The knight turned to the right as soon as he was in the crowd, and passed rapidly through a throng of Bavarian knights of the poorer kind, who stood around tables near the entrance of the great booth. He was soon lost in the crowd, and pursued his way across the great square, through soldiers of all kinds, till he arrived at the old town-hall, opposite the great fountain.

Here Sir Adelbert halted, and entered the shelter of a small but deep archway, that sheltered a side postern under the municipal building. All the public edifices of Nuremberg were appropriated for the various magnates of the empire, but Sir Adelbert appeared to be perfectly at home everywhere.

He gave a low tap at the door, which was instantly opened by Max the Ranger, now dressed

in a handsome livery of dark green, with a silver falcon in full flight on his breast.

"How is your lady, Max?" asked Sir Adelbert of the Ranger.

"Well, my lord," said honest Stoffler, respectfully. "But she has been crying a little since the tournament."

"She shall be comforted," said Sir Adelbert, laughing. "Bolt the door, Max. No one will need to come in *here*."

He went down a dark passage, and up a winding flight of stone steps, then down several corridors in the quaint, rambling old building, till a light shone under a door in front of him.

He advanced, and gave three knocks on the panel. A man's voice within, that seemed to be reading aloud, ceased at the sound, and a female voice cried out: "It is Rudolph; I know it!"

There was a swift rustle of garments and a patter of little feet, and then the door flew open, and sweet little Bertha danced out, radiant with joy, and flung herself on the knight's breast with a glad cry.

"Adelbert! Rudolph! my lord! my husband! How I have been longing for you all day! Father Francis was reading me the story of the princess Psyche, but I hardly heard it, listening for my lord's step. Where have you been all day? I have been so lonely."

Sir Adelbert smiled and kissed his young wife.

"I have been away on business, lady-bird," he said. "Did you like the tournament?"

"Oh!" she said shuddering, "it was terrible. I looked everywhere for you and could not see you. Max put me in that splendid horse-litter, and took me there, but I was all alone. No one seemed to see me, for I was hidden by the curtains. And then those thirteen knights came in, and the fighting began, and I was frightened for the poor fellows, and I did want to talk to some one, and you were nowhere to be seen. I was glad when it was over. If you had been there it would have been different. Then I should have loved to see you fight, as I did when you struck down Sir Wolfgang. But I did not care for the rest."

"Tell me, Bertha," said the knight, sitting down in an arm-chair, and taking his little wife on his knee, while father Francis closed the book he had been reading, "Was there not any knight there whom you liked to see?"

"How could I tell?" asked Bertha. "They were all in plain armor, with visors down, and I could not tell one from the other. I liked the tall knight in the middle of the thirteen silver horsemen, best. His figure looked a little like yours, but not near as handsome. Who was he? Adelbert—no Rudolph, you say I'm to call you, Max was nowhere to be found when I asked him."

"Do you mean the leader of the Crossicordians?" asked Sir Adelbert. "That was the emperor himself."

"The emperor!" she said, in a tone of childish awe. "Oh, how I wish I'd known that! He must be good; for he looks like you, Rudolph. And how terribly he rode. I thought it was done with him when he met the great knight of the Rhineland the first time. But the second time he crushed him right down. I clapped my hands then."

"And did you not recognize that great knight, Bertha?" asked Sir Adelbert. "It was your own guardian, Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein."

"He!" exclaimed Bertha, clapping her hands. "Isn't that good? If I'd known that, how glad I should have been. The great coward! He nearly killed father Francis."

Sir Adelbert smiled at her energy.

"Little girl," he said, softly, neither father Francis nor yourself shall ever suffer from him again, and before the leaves are brown we will both be in Falkenstein."

Bertha looked up wistfully.

"You have said that before," she answered; "how I wish I knew how you're to do it. But I don't even know who you are."

And she began to pout again.

"Bertha," said the knight, gravely, "you know one thing. I am your husband. Hitherto you have obeyed me. When I sent Max to summon you from Falkenstein, you obeyed like a good wife. You did not ask who I was then. Trust me still. I have my reasons for not telling you yet. What they are you shall know soon."

"How soon?" she asked, persistently.

"When I hold Wolfgang of Ernstein *here*," replied the knight, closing his hand; "ask no questions till then, and remember Psyche."

Here the voice of father Francis, gentle and

monotonous, broke on the little quarrel, as he spread out a vellum manuscript before him, and read:

"And when the princess Psyche heard her envious sisters say that she had married a devil, because he only came to her at night, and went away before morning, and she had never seen his face since they were wed, she was much troubled. His voice was sweet, but she feared that her sisters were right. So the next night she waited till her husband slept, when she lighted a lamp and took it to see what he was like. And lo! instead of a devil, it was the god of love himself, who lay, smiling in his sleep, before her. But as she bent over him a drop of oil from the lamp fell on his forehead and awakened him. And when he saw that he was discovered, the beautiful god sighed deeply and said: 'Alas, Psyche, now have you parted yourself from love forever. Had you but waited, all had been well. But suspicion drives away love.' And so he spread his wings and flew away, and never came to Psyche more upon this earth. And Psyche wept bitterly when it was too late, for her husband was gone."

Bertha shuddered, and clung close to Sir Adelbert.

"Oh! my lord!" she said, with a quivering lip, "thou wouldst not leave thy Bertha forever, wouldst thou? She will ask no more questions; but wait patiently for thy time, indeed she will."

"Leave thee, Bertha!" he said, loudly; "not now, my sweet heart of hearts. Nay, then, I will only entreat thee if thou lovest me, to abstain from questions for one week. After that we shall be at Falkenstein once more."

"And shall I really know who you are?" she asked; "have I only one week more to wait? Oh! then, I will wait."

"And now tell me, Bertha," said Sir Adelbert, gravely, "hast thou been happy since I took thee from Falkenstein, in spite of all this mystery that surrounds thee?"

"Have I not had thee, my lord?" she asked. "Yes, I have been happy when I see thee, but when thou're away, I doubt and fear. And everything puzzles poor me, who never was off the stones of the Falcon's Nest before. I see ladies ride by on prancing horses, and I remember that I never was on a horse in my life; and then—what is this Crossicorde, my lord, that I hear the people cry out?"

She broke off abruptly with this question.

Sir Adelbert answered in the words of the order:

"The cross in the heart; the heart under the cross; that is the Crossicorde, Bertha. The emperor instituted the order this day, to regenerate knighthood to what it once was. Let us all pray with him, God bless the Crossicorde!"

"God bless the Crossicorde," said little Bertha, hardly knowing what it was, only that her husband loved it.

"God bless the Crossicorde!" chimed in the gentle voice of father Francis.

CHAPTER XIII. COMING HOME.

The tournament was over at last. For three whole days had the knights of the Crossicorde withstood all comers without receiving a fall. After the first day the marshals of the lists passed an order that half an hour's rest should be given to men and horses between each three courses run, and the unfair crowding in of the Rhineland knights was rendered impossible to be tried over again.

In the third day's tilting Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein did well. He broke three lances on three different enemies, and caused the Margrave of Wurtemburg to lose a stirrup, which no one else had done.

When the tournament was over he was among the first to take his departure with all his train. Since the night of the feast he had been looking everywhere for Sir Adelbert, but without success. Remarkable as was the figure of the knight, it was yet nowhere to be seen, and Sir Wolfgang was disappointed.

In seeing the face of the Grand Master of the Crossicorde he was equally unsuccessful. The emperor never came into the field save in full armor and with visor down. He had been seen to raise the latter, but only at a great distance, and no one could have told his face even then.

So that Sir Wolfgang went his way in the worst of tempers with himself and all mankind, and rode for two days without interchanging a syllable with a soul, on his way to the Black Forest.

On the third day, as he was nearing the forest, he espied, at a great distance to the right, on a parallel road, a cloud of dust.

"Whose column can that be?" he asked of Red Max, who rode close behind him. "The Baron of Ritterschloss was too far behind to be there. That is the fork road that comes in by the front of the castle, is it not?"

"Ay, my lord," said Red Max, stroking his beard; "it seems to be a heavy column of men-at-arms, for their helmets glitter through the dust. But it cannot be the men of Ritterschloss."

"Then it must be enemies," said Ernstein, decisively; "no one but Ritterschloss or an enemy has any right *there* in full armor."

Red Max looked nervous. He felt that his master's words were true. Sir Wolfgang turned to his trumpeter.

"Sound the trot," he said, sharply; "those fellows will get home before we do, else."

The loud blare of the trumpet rung over the meadows; and the long column of men-at-arms, over a hundred strong, took up the trot and went away down the dusty road after Sir Wolfgang, with a steady *clank! clank! clank!* that could be heard a mile off.

Before them lay the dense cover of the Black Forest, into which, on another road, the cloud of dust that indicated the enemy was going at a rapid rate.

Their own road, white, hot, broad and dusty, struck into the forest a quarter of a mile ahead.

While they were still outside the forest they could trace their enemies for some distance by the white cloud that rose above the tree-tops. Then they entered the wall of wood themselves, and their foes were hidden.

Sir Wolfgang trotted rapidly ahead on his great black charger, the white dust rising in clouds from below, and powdering horse and man alike into gray images.

The men in the column behind were all equally gray, faintly seen through the dusty veil; and, but for the loud clank of armor and the thunder of horses' feet, they might have passed for a troop of specters flitting along in the deep shades of the Black Forest.

On they went at a round pace for over a mile, till the heavy war-horses, unused to such rapid work on the march, were all covered with foam. The road went straight as an arrow through the same silent, solemn wall of fir-trees, and they were still a mile or more from the junction. Sir Wolfgang moderated his charger to a slow trot, and jogged along at an easier pace.

"They can't help crossing in front of us," he said. "We mustn't kill our horses before there's any need of it. Walk!"

The troop kept up its course at a walk while their horses cooled, and so they proceeded to within a mile of the forks of the road, the same sultry blue sky and blazing August sun overhead, the same silent pine-trees on either side of the road.

Suddenly, at a silent signal from their leader, the whole column halted and kept still in the middle of the road. Sir Wolfgang listened intently.

Through the dark veil of forest, and some distance ahead and to the right, came the rapid *clash! clash! clash!* of a quickly-trotting column of men-at-arms.

"Forward!" shouted the old raider, as he gave the rein to his charger and thundered off.

But he had not gotten a hundred yards on his road when he saw a white flag, borne by a knight in armor, emerge from the woods a mile ahead, cross the road, and disappear into the forest on the opposite side, on the road to Falkenstein.

The knight was going at a keen trot, and was followed by a column of troopers at the same pace, in sections of eight abreast, as straight and regular as machines.

They were all half hidden behind a thick yellow veil of dust, and passed so rapidly that one could not count their numbers.

In the middle of the troop appeared a litter with four white horses, which flashed across the road and disappeared in the forest. Then more men-at-arms, and the troop had disappeared. As the last man entered the forest on the Falkenstein road Sir Wolfgang's company was still three-quarters of a mile off, trotting hard to catch the others. The old raider shook his bridle and galloped on ahead, and arrived at the opening in time to see the last man of the strange column disappearing round a curve of the Falkenstein road as far ahead as ever. He halted in disgust. It was plain that the enemy had the heels of him.

When his men came up he again brought them to a walk and followed leisurely. The old road still went on through the woods to Ritterschloss. The cross-road was much narrower and led in a serpentine sweep to the front gate of Falkenstein castle.

"They cannot get in. So much is certain," Sir Wolfgang observed; "the seneschal has the portcullis down and the drawbridge up, so we shall take them in the rear if that's their game. We can afford to go slow."

He pursued his march in the best order known in those days, with his baggage animals in the center of his train, and a sufficient guard in front and rear.

He himself, with visor down, mindful of former ill-luck, rode several paces in front with his lance up, ready to drop in rest in a moment.

So the robber knight's troop slowly proceeded along the winding road, no longer dusty, but cool and green, the woods around them gradually changing to oak and beech, with glimpses of deer flitting through the green archways.

The nearer they came to the castle the greater was the excitement. The tracks of their predecessors' feet could be plainly seen all the time, cutting up the green turf, and here and there a broken feather caught in a branch, showed where some careless man-at-arms had lost a plume as he rode too near the trees.

At last they arrived at the point where the next turn would bring them in sight of the castle gate, and Sir Wolfgang, full of impatience, gave the rein to his horse and galloped on ahead. He turned the corner and glanced forward.

Not a soul was to be seen in front of the castle, but the broad brown track led right past the gate, and into the greenwood beyond where the straight road led down to a ford of the Rhine, that went into the territory of the Margrave of Wurtemburg.

Sir Wolfgang threw his horse on his haunches as he drew sharply up. His suspicions were at once excited. He glanced nervously round, expecting an ambush, but nothing was to be seen.

The castle drawbridge was up and the portcullis closed, so that every thing was safe there. The seneschal and several men were at the lattice over the gate, where Sir Adelbert had first seen Bertha. They were looking anxiously out toward the woods as if something had alarmed them, and caught sight of their masters at once with a shout of joy.

As Sir Wolfgang halted his men came up and imitated his example, and the whole troop preserved a dead silence, under the vague feeling of apprehension engendered by the sudden stoppage.

Through the midst of this silence the *clank! clank! clank!* of another troop of men-at-arms trotting through the woods far in their rear became gradually more and more audible.

The robber knight threw up his visor to hear more distinctly, and there was no mistake. A second troop of armed men, perhaps enemies, was without doubt coming rapidly after them. Sir Wolfgang felt a strange throb at his breast as he listened. He felt no doubt that it was his enemies, who made those sounds. As he listened he heard the noise of another column still, coming from the direction of Ritterschloss, and realized that he was surrounded.

"Forward!" he said, his voice shaking for the first time; "enemies are round us, lads, and we must e'en take shelter."

The men were all very silent, as they rode forward over the flowery meads in front of the castle. While they marched on, down rattled the drawbridge, and the portcullis rose slowly up in its groove.

Sir Wolfgang rode into the court-yard with a sigh of relief, and could hardly believe his eyes when he saw his men all safe in, without a sign of an enemy outside as yet.

He threw himself from his horse and ran up the steps of the watch-tower, by the gate, followed by the seneschal.

"Who passed you just before we came, Conrad?" asked the knight, hastily, when he had attained the summit and looked out to the forest.

"A great troop of men-at-arms, with a horse-litter in their midst," replied Conrad. "We thought they were enemies, but they rode by at a trot toward the ford as if they had not so much as seen the castle."

"What banner bore they?" demanded Sir Wolfgang.

"A white banner," said the seneschal; "and in the midst thereof a crimson heart, bearing a golden cross on itself. None can tell whose device it was."

Sir Wolfgang turned pale, but said nothing. He stood on the loftiest tower of the castle, which rose far above the tallest trees in the forest, and commanded an extensive view of the country round. He could see the road to the castle, the road to the ford, and the narrow forest-path that led to Ritterschloss. He also knew well the line of the outside road from

Nuremberg, which he could trace by the break in the tree-tops. All along this outer line as he looked rose a cloud of white dust, that soared above the dark-green forest in a well defined line for at least a mile.

Then he looked down at the road he had come by. A deep, compact troop of mail-clad horsemen came trotting on in the midst of it, and they came in full view as Sir Wolfgang continued to gaze.

At the head of them rode a knight in white armor, with a red spot on his breast-plate like a drop of blood, even at that distance. On the end of his long lance was a small swallow-tailed white pennon, and in the midst of the field shone the bloody heart with the golden cross thereon.

Sir Wolfgang turned round to the river and ford. There, on the ford road, was the same column he had first seen, with the great square white banner he had noticed. But now that he saw it nearer, he felt a thrill of terror, as he recognized, in the midst of the white field, the holy Crossicorde, in its glory of crimson and gold.

His troop of men-at arms was halted as if to cut off any escape toward the river, and Sir Wolfgang gloomily turned his gaze toward the path to Ritterschloss.

Behold! There was another troop coming along there in single file, and at their head was another white pennon, with the crossed heart in its center.

"We are beset," said Sir Wolfgang, gloomily; "the whole power of the empire lies behind the folds of that banner and those pennons. There is but one thing to do. I must marry this Bertha quickly, and open the gates. Then I shall be able to say I hold the lands by right of my wife."

He turned to descend the tower, when the seneschal arrested him with these words:

"My lord," he said, "we fear that the lady Bertha is sick or dead. The doors of the Falcon's Tower have been kept locked ever since you went. The food was taken in, and the dishes left outside till yesterday morning. Since then nothing has been seen of her or father Francis."

Sir Wolfgang looked across the castle court and over the battlements to the Falcon's Tower.

"Fool!" he said, "look there."

On the gallery that ran round the top of the tower, was a female figure, and close beside it that of a monk. As he looked, both disappeared into the tower.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUMMONS.

"SHE has been fooling thee, Conrad," said the castellan, grimly. "Well, well. See if she fools me very long now. We must make our defense good till we have her safe, and then I can laugh at this siege if the man is outside I think of. Let us see what these Crossicordians will do."

He looked down from the tower at the woods.

The first column of men-at-arms had deployed into line, and halted at the edge of the meadows surrounding the castle. The file of men coming from Ritterschloss was just performing the same operation, while the men at the ford were coming back to the castle.

By listening attentively, the buzz and thunder of hoofs of a fourth column could be heard behind the screen of woods toward Nuremberg.

But as yet no hostile motion had been made.

Now, however, as the banner column came up from the ford, a trumpeter and herald were seen to detach themselves from beside the banner and gallop up to the gate, where the trumpeter blew a loud blast.

The castellan instantly clattered down the steps of the tower to the same lattice whence sweet Bertha first beheld Sir Adelbert.

Here he found the trumpeter blowing a second summons.

"What ails thee, varlet?" cried the robber knight, sternly; "dost think we of the castle are deaf? What would you?"

The herald answered instead of the trumpeter.

He was clad in pure white, with the Crossicorde on his breast. He unfolded a parchment and read:

"Rudolph Adelbert Maximilian, Count of Hapsburg, by the grace of God. Emperor of Germany and Grand Master of the order of the Most Holy Crossicorde, sends to Wolfgang, the butcher's son, false knight and robber, his strict commands, that, laying aside all vain confidence in the strength of this castle, he do open his gates and admit his liege lord and sovereign to his castle of Falkenstein, submitting himself wholly to his lord's pleasure."

"(Signed) RUDOLPH ADELBERT MAXIMILIAN, 'Imperator.'

When the herald had finished reading, the trumpeter blew a second long blast, and belowed, at the top of his voice:

"Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! Open your gates!"

Sir Wolfgang looked troubled and perplexed. He said to the herald:

"How am I to know who thou com'st from? That's not the livery of the Emperor Rudolph."

"His grace, the emperor, will come himself to the gate, if it is not opened quickly," said the herald, sharply.

"I hold my lands here in right of my wife," said Sir Wolfgang, hesitatingly. "His majesty does not know that I have wed the lady Bertha von Falkenstein. Tell him so, and beg him not to take it as courtesy that I do not admit him, but that I fear some false traitors have turned his royal heart from his faithful servant."

"Then you refuse to admit his majesty?" asked the herald.

"By no means," said the robber chief, apologetically; "if his majesty will enter alone, we shall be proud to see him, but we can not admit his train."

The herald wheeled his horse and rode off.

Sir Wolfgang waited anxiously. He felt that justice had overtaken him from an unexpected quarter.

Instead of unknown Sir Adelbert for an enemy, he had roused the whole power of the empire against himself in some manner, and the work of the Crossicorde was beginning with him.

He felt like a wolf in a trap, cowed and humble.

After the departure of the herald there was a short silence. Then Sir Wolfgang beheld all three bodies of men-at-arms obey a single trumpet signal. The men quietly dismounted and fastened their horses to trees, leaning their long lances against the branches. But nothing hostile seemed to be as yet intended. The men merely sat down in groups on the grass, and undid their wallets for dinner.

"A siege!" muttered the knight. "Well, I can stand it as well as you. A year's grain is stored in the cellars, and the walls will defy all your artillery."*

He was looking moodily at the three bright troops of besiegers, when he heard the quick gallop of a horse over the greensward, and beheld a horseman coming rapidly out of the forest toward him.

This horseman wore no armor, and was dressed in green.

He rode a roan horse, and the nearer he came the more familiar did his appearance seem.

When he finally drew rein under the lattice and looked laughingly up, Sir Wolfgang was hardly surprised to see his old enemy, Sir Adelbert.

The young knight was handsomer than ever, dressed and armed precisely as he had been when first we saw him, and followed by the same three immense boar-hounds.

"Well, Sir Wolfgang," he said, gayly, "I have kept my word, you see. The leaves are not yet brown."

Sir Wolfgang frowned. The sight of his handsome foe maddened him, and roused him from the spell of hopelessness under which he was laboring.

"I see it, popinjay," he said, savagely; "but not for a nameless hound like thee do I shut my gates and stay in. Thy betters are here. The emperor himself attacks me, so get thee gone before my crossbowmen shoot at thee, or yon men-at-arms spear thee."

Sir Adelbert laughed.

"Well," he said, "supposing I come here by the emperor's leave, how then?"

"The emperor is yonder," said Ernstein, sullenly; "under that square banner of his precious Crossicorde, as he calls it. How can he give thee leave? Thou camest from the forest."

"And yet I tell you that the emperor is not there," said Sir Adelbert, smiling; "and I know where he is."

* This word does not here mean cannon. It was used long before the invention of gunpowder, and applied to the machines for casting stones, used in medieval times, such as catapults, mangonels, trebuchets and springalds. Sometimes it was used even for bows and arrows, when in large quantities. In a French MS. of the fifteenth century it so occurs in an enumeration of stores at the battle of Cressy, "bows, springalds, crossbows and other artillery." It is owing to a misapprehension of this word that the popular mistake has arisen that cannon were used at the battle of Cressy. The statement to that effect is not met with till late in the sixteenth century, and Cressy was fought 1346.

"Where is he, then?" asked the castellan with a sneer. "You are a pretty fellow, indeed, to know an emperor! If you know so well, tell me where he is."

"Nay, but that is for thee to find," said Sir Adelbert, smiling. "I come and offer thee, in his name, thy choice of three things. Either to give up thy castle, come out to be hanged for thy crimes along with thy robber friends; to stand a siege, and be drawn by wild horses if taken; or, to fight me for the lady Bertha and Falkenstein lands."

Sir Wolfgang looked down in surprise at the slight frame of the audacious youth. Then he thought he would try a bit of bluster.

"The lady Bertha is my wife," he said, scornfully; "and the lands of Falkenstein are mine."

Sir Adelbert laughed again.

"I'll fight thee on that question," he said, quietly. "The lady Bertha is not thy wife. Come. Wilt fight, or dost fear to meet me?"

"I'll fight thee, braggart young popinjay," said Sir Wolfgang, savagely. "If I come out to thee, I'll strip thy fine feathers from thee full soon. But how know I that it be not a trick to draw me from my castle into an ambush?"

Sir Adelbert altered his light tone to one of deep and solemn earnest.

"Because," he said, "thou seest the Crossicorde is before thee. Darest thou to think that the emperor would break his word? I plight thee the promise of Rudolph of Hapsburg, to give thee fair battle against me only, in this field, and if I fail, to retire all these forces, and leave thee to enjoy the lands of Falkenstein forever."

"And what authority hast thou to pledge the word of the emperor?" demanded Sir Wolfgang, scornfully.

"This!" said the other.

As he spoke he pointed to a device worked on the breast of his velvet doublet. It was the Crossicorde itself.

"None wears that but a knight of his word," said Sir Adelbert. "Listen to mine, for it will be kept. To-morrow morn, at nine of the clock, I shall be on this meadow, ready to fight you. Till then you have respite from all harm. If you do not come out then and fight, you shall be hanged by noon, and if you lose the fight you shall be tried as a robber. Farewell till to-morrow."

Sir Adelbert turned and galloped away to the white banner, where he spoke to the standard-bearer.

In a few minutes more the trumpets blew camp-call, and the rumbling of wagons announced that a regular army had sat down before Falkenstein.

CHAPTER XV.

SIR WOLFGANG'S RAGE.

WOLFGANG of Ernstein turned away from the lattice, and went down to his men. He inspected the defenses of the castle on the land side with all the care of a veteran warrior, set his guards and appointed watches.

On the water side he felt no apprehensions. A perpendicular wall of rock fell away from the foundations to the river, and the latter was too deep and rapid to be forded below. There was, it is true, the tradition of the first Rudolph von Falkenstein having climbed up, once on a time, by the Falcon's Nest, but that was a mere tradition, and the knight regarded it not.

He was thinking only of one thing as he went along the gallery to the Falcon's Tower, that he would marry Bertha that very night, and so be able to claim the lands in her right in the morning.

"As for that Adelbert," he muttered savagely, "I'll settle with him in the morning."

He arrived at a strong iron door at the base of the tower, which led to Bertha's apartments, and outside which was a stone bench, whereon the servants were wont to set the dishes for her lonely meals. Contrary to the seneschal's information, the dishes were gone.

"I knew she was here," said the knight, grimly. "Now, madam, come out."

And he tried the handle of the door. It was as firm and immovable as the wall itself.

"Ho! Bertha," shouted the strong knight, beating on the door with his mail glove; "open! 'Tis I, thy guardian, Sir Wolfgang. Come out, for I want to speak to thee."

Only dead silence answered his cries.

He grew angry, and tried to shake the door. Alas! it was useless. The door had no hinges, but ran in a groove in the solid granite wall. He had ordered it so constructed himself to

make the tower a secure last refuge in case of a siege.

To get that door down, it was necessary to batter it to pieces with a ram, and the gallery and stairs of approach had been purposely made too narrow and winding to admit of a ram being brought against it.

"Never mind," said the old robber knight, vindictively; "you have no wings, my lady, and there is no food in that tower but what was sent to you. Starvation will bring you out when I have killed your pretty lover. And then I'll make you pay for all this."

He turned away and ascended to the battlements, to try if he could not see some more of the tower.

Along the outside of the line of the curtain, supported on beams of wood, projecting outward, was a covered gallery, loopholed beneath for archers, and denominated the *hourdes*. It ran around the whole crest of the fortresses of the Middle Ages, and was used for the soldiers to pour down melted lead or quick-lime on any of the enemy who had got into the moat. Inside of this was a broad rampart to walk on, and Sir Wolfgang could see the top of the Falcon's Tower, smooth, round, and crowned with an extinguisher-like roof, towering for forty feet above the ramparts. But there were no windows except toward the river, and no means of getting to them. For there was no place on which to put a ladder below.

While he looked up, in great anger, a man's face made its appearance at the gallery on top, under the roof of the tower. It was father Francis.

"What, ho! father Francis!" shouted the angry knight, shaking his clinched fist; "come down and open the door, thou cursed priest, or I'll have thee flayed alive when I catch thee!"

"Go away, wicked man," said the priest, sternly: "I tell thee that thine end approaches. Have we not seen the banner of the Crossicorde without? We know well what it means to all of your wicked crew. Cease then to trouble me, and go."

Sir Wolfgang nearly went into a fit, he was so utterly enraged and astounded at the friar's boldness. He foamed at the mouth, stamped, raved and swore, and finally shrieked out:

"Take care, thou insolent friar. All the force of the empire shall not save thee after to-morrow morning. Once let me get these soldiers away, and then beware! Torture never was invented like what I shall give thee to-morrow night."

"Boast not thyself of the morrow," said father Francis; "to-morrow's sun may set on thy corpse."

"Call my ward to me, and get thee gone, friar!" bellowed Wolfgang. "Where is Bertha?"

"Find out for thyself," said the monk, sternly. "Like me, she is out of thy power. Rave on! Farewell!"

He disappeared from the gallery, while Sir Wolfgang made the walls echo to the name of Bertha.

But no Bertha came. She must be in the tower, Sir Wolfgang felt confident, for there were no means of egress save through the gallery below. Fuming and cursing, he descended below and set a guard on the end of the gallery with orders to seize any one who opened the door, and bring them to him.

Then he went to the donjon, and ate his moody supper, looked well to his armor, proving every piece, and putting aside his heaviest tilting spears for the morrow's fight.

He chose the largest battle-ax he had for the conclusion of the fight. He intended to crush his agile opponent by main strength, giving him no opportunity for his quick dexterity, but plying him with blow on blow.

His weapons duly looked to, he returned to the care of his guards. He inspirited his men by the news that the siege would be raised as soon as he conquered his slim antagonist. Knowing his prowess, they were much relieved by the intelligence.

Sir Wolfgang paid a last visit to the turret door, where all was silent as the grave. Then he retired to his bed, and was soon fast asleep, from the effects of the copious potations he had imbibed. His conscience was too tough to disturb him, and he feared not the issue of the morning's fight.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE CASTLE GHOST.

THE face of the Falcon's Rock was invisible from any part of the castle save the tower above it, and therefore none of the castle sentries were aware of what went on there. Just as the

moon went down in the west and the night was at its darkest; a boat was pushed out softly from the further shore of the river, just above the line of white foam that marked the first rapid.

The boat emerged from the shelter of a quantity of willows that drooped into the water, and moved steadily from the shore, heading a little down-stream, but without any visible means of propulsion, as there were no oars. The boat was large and loaded to the gunwale with armed men.

Had you been close enough to see what passed, you would have beheld three of them hauling on a rope which was buried in the water, and which passed through a ring in the bow, and another in the stern of the boat. The rope was evidently attached to either shore, and allowed to lie hidden under the water, where the force of the current bulged it into a great semicircle. Silently as a spirit the boat stole across in the shadow, and reached the other shore, where the men silently disembarked, while the boat returned in the same way, guided by a single man.

Thirty armed figures then began to scale the Falcon's Rock. They trod on the firm rounds of a ladder of thick wire, fastened up among the crevices of the rock, hidden from view by climbing mosses and lichens, but strong enough for twenty men at a time.

Still they did not ascend it with any haste. One at a time scaled the Falcon's Nest, above which a second ladder appeared, but without any concealment. The first man that ascended was unarmed, either for defense or offense. He skinned the rounds as if he was well used to the work, and soon stood at the window in the tower. A light was shining from it, and within stood father Francis and a young lad with black curls, whose mischievous face was wreathed with smiles as Sir Adelbert, for it was he, scaled the balcony.

"We have fooled him, my lord," said the saucy page. "He took me for the lady Bertha, and swore roundly at father Francis. I wanted to talk back to him from the top of the tower, but father Francis would not let me. He said he would have known my voice and suspected something."

"Good lad," said Sir Adelbert. "Now, father Francis, we have finished with your duty. Well have you done it. You can go back to camp, and comfort the lady Bertha till I come. Go by the boat when the men are all here."

The head of a man-at-arms appeared over the balcony as he spoke, and one by one the heavy-armed warriors came slowly up, puffing and blowing at their unusual toil.

"Now, men," said Sir Adelbert, "all you have to do is to lie quiet, and sleep in safety and silence. In the morning keep still until one of two things happens. Either you will hear my voice at the door yonder, or you will hear the trumpet outside sound the assault. If you hear the latter, open the door, dash out, and slay all you meet. If nothing happens, at twelve o'clock you will hear the trumpets sound retreat. In that case return the way you came, for I shall have been conquered, and my word is pledged then not to molest the castle. Now I am going to do something. Wait till I come back, and I will tell you more."

He left the lower room as he spoke, and ascended to the top of the tower. Here he threw out of the front window a long rope, which he fastened to an iron stanchion in the wall. The rope hung down below the lower window. He returned to it by the stairs, and found a second boat-load of men-at-arms slowly climbing to the chamber. Then the knight sprung on the balcony, seized the rope, and gave a vigorous swing from the window all around the face of the tower to reach the battlements of the curtain. After two or three unsuccessful efforts, swinging to and fro over the giddy void, he succeeded in planting his feet on the summit of the *hourdes*, and gained the battlements.

He halted there, and glanced keenly along the top of the ramparts. The waterface of Falkenstein was totally deserted. Sir Adelbert smiled.

"When danger seems least, it is often most," he said aloud.

He pulled in the end of the rope in his hand, and gave it a turn round one of the beams of the *hourdes*. Then, from the pouch that hung at his girdle, he pulled out a long white gauze robe, in which he enveloped himself from head to foot.

Slowly and noiselessly, then, he glided over the ramparts to the donjon, without meeting a sentry, and entered the latter building by a gallery that led straight to the baron's chamber. He passed several sleeping figures now, and roamed through the donjon at his will, looking

down into the great hall from a side gallery. In the hall, by the fire, sat the guard, talking to each other to keep awake, and Sir Adelbert saw that their vigilance was but small, after all. He appeared openly in the gallery, and gave a hollow groan. The startled guard sprung up in dismay, and saw the white figure, just as it disappeared in the black doorway to the gallery.

With one accord they fell on their knees, yelling out:

"The castle ghost! The castle ghost!"

And immediately a great stir arose all over the castle. The clash of arms, shouts from one to another, all the symptoms of a night alarm, spread with marvelous rapidity.

As Sir Adelbert returned at a rapid pace by the very sleepers he had passed before, one and all shrunk from before him, with the cry of:

"The castle ghost!"

He was past the baron's door, and on his way to the battlements, when he heard the heavy tramp of the old warrior and his thundering voice bellowing:

"A trick! a trick! After him! 'Tis the priest."

Sir Adelbert distanced his heavy pursuer, and gained the ramparts. As he flitted along he could see the sentries on the opposite side of the ramparts start up and shout and point at him. He fled faster than ever, till he gained the rope, which he cast off, and leaped to the top of the *hourdes* with its help.

Then he stood and looked back. Out of the door in the side of the donjon came Sir Wolfgang, followed by a number of men, swearing furiously, with brandished swords. Sir Adelbert uttered a long, wild cry and sprung over the battlements, disappearing from view in an instant. He swung round the face of the tower, and lighted on the balcony without any difficulty, where he stood listening a moment, motioning the soldiers in the room below to silence. They could hear the rush of feet on the battlements, and then a pause.

Presently the voice of Sir Wolfgang was heard in tones that quivered in spite of himself.

"Who saw it first?"

"I, my lord," said another man. "It must be the ghost of Sir Rudolph. They say it walks up and down these battlements every night, and always leaps off at the same place."

"It is very strange," said the knight, thoughtfully; "no human being could leap over there and live."

"It's Sir Rudolph's ghost, my lord," answered the man, in an earnest tone; "we have all of us seen it every night since you have been away, flitting about, till we have grown frightened to come near this part of the castle."

Here the young page, who was close to Sir Adelbert, clutched his master's hand and whispered:

"'Twas I, my lord. I swung over every night."

Sir Rudolph smiled.

"Good, Lorenz," he whispered back; "thou hast done well."

Sir Wolfgang was heard saying: "If there were a door to the tower I should think it the cursed priest. But it cannot be. Set a guard on the door to the donjon, and if it comes again we will try an arrow at it. Come, lads."

The sound of retreating footsteps was audible, and Sir Adelbert turned away to give his orders to the concealed party in the tower.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE BATTLE.

The morning dawned, clear and bright, and Sir Wolfgang arose, with the gloomy air and bloodshot eyes that told of one who had slept ill. In fact, since the alarm of the pretended ghost, he had hardly closed an eye, but seemed to be in perpetual inquietude. Like Richard at Bosworth, shadows had struck terror to the soul that conscience could not touch, and his hands trembled as he buckled on his armor.

But a light breakfast and a deep draught of wine soon drove away these gloomy thoughts, and he donned the last piece of armor and called for his horse with his old rough voice.

The charger was brought forth, the best in his stable, where it had stood till it was wild with spirits, and very hard to control, except by a practiced horseman. Sir Wolfgang was a splendid sight as he stood on the hall steps waiting for his charger to come to him. He was accoutered in magnificent Milanese armor, heavily inlaid with gold, in that combination of mail and plate which the latter part of the thirteenth century presented as perhaps the most picturesque form of armor ever worn. The great stuffed eagle brooded over his hel-

met, the heavy cuirass, arm-pieces and gauntlets seemed to inclose a giant, and his mail hose were made of gold and steel rings, alternately interwoven.

"Soho! Blitzn. Soho!" he said, proudly patting the neck of his gray charger. Then putting foot in stirrup, he slowly swung himself into the deep saddle, and sat like a tower, while the great horse curveted and leaped to and fro beneath him.

His men shouted for joy at the gallant figure. It seemed to be that of a man whom one could trust a life with.

"The lances, Max," shouted the deep voice of the baron, as he placed his heavy battle-ax in its holster by the saddle-bow, and out came Red Max with a bundle of heavy lances, one of which he offered his master.

The clear note of a trumpet outside announced that Sir Adelbert was in his place.

"Look to the castle, lads!" cried Sir Wolfgang; "if I'm slain, down with the portcullis, and sell your lives dearly. But, I shall not be slain. Open the gate now. Come, Max!"

The portcullis rose, creaking in its grooves, and the great drawbridge thundered down with a loud *boom*! as Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein went prancing out on the green, in full view of both sides, with visor down and lance up.

In the middle of the green, mounted on a great white charger, of far slighter frame than his own, was a tall, slightly-framed knight, in white armor, as beautiful as a vision. From the tip of the plume to the courser's feet, all was white, housings and all. Helmet and cuirass were covered with silver, the mail hose that clothed the graceful limbs were equally bright. Only the shield was heart-shaped and blood-red, bearing a golden cross in its center. From under the raised visor showed the handsome, noble-looking face of Sir Adelbert, who rode forward with his lance up. He looked too slight and fragile in appearance for the burly baron to have any trouble in crushing, and it seemed to be a pity to match such unequal combatants.

"Well, Sir Wolfgang," he said, as he drew near the other; "you are ready, I see. Do you still assert that the lady Bertha is your wife?"

Sir Wolfgang threw up his visor to speak more freely.

"I say that she is in my power," he said, grimly—"that she and Falkenstein are both mine, and that I will keep them, in spite of thee and all thy tricks."

Sir Adelbert turned in his saddle and pointed to the woods. All along the edge was a line of armed horsemen, encircling the castle, and at least a thousand strong. From the midst of them now issued two figures, a monk on a mule, and a lady on a white palfrey, magnificently dressed. The lady wore on her head a small coronet with a drooping ostrich feather, and as she drew near Ernstein recognized both. The lady was his own ward Bertha, the crown was the imperial diadem of the empress of all Germany! The monk was, as undoubtedly, father Francis.

Sir Wolfgang gazed like one in a dream as the monk and the empress advanced. He heard, as in a dream, the voice of Sir Adelbert saying:

"Wolfgang, the traitor! Murderer, liar, and false knight! You asked me my name once, and I told you I would tell it to you just before I set my lance in rest to punish you. Wolfgang, the traitor, take thy place and die before the lance of RUDOLPH OF HAPSBURG, EMPEROR OF GERMANY!"

Sir Wolfgang uttered a smothered groan, as he saw the young emperor close his visor and gallop off to take his distance. Mechanically he assumed his own place, hardly conscious of what he did. Then, seeing the dim vision of a white figure spurring toward him, the knightly instinct broke out. With the desperate cry of a beast at bay, he drove his spurs into his charger's sides and dashed at the emperor.

The white steed went with a wonderful velocity that compensated for his less weight, and both knights met with the shock of a catapult's bolt.

The tough lances splintered up to the very gauntlets, and both knights staggered in their saddles. But Ernstein, never waiting for a second course, pulled out his battle-ax and attacked the emperor with the fury of a lion. His only hope now was to kill Rudolph, and claim the word of the knights of the Cross-corde.

The emperor was fully alive to the dangerous character of his antagonist, and the impossibility of closing with him with a hope of

success. Only the low bow he had made in the moment of closing had preserved him from being unhorsed by the tremendous shock of Wolfgang's lance. With a touch of the spur he made his horse passage to one side, while he drew out the keen thrusting-sword he wore. Then was seen at a glance the superiority of his horsemanship. The huge knight and the graceful young emperor circled round each other, and ever and anon the white steed whirled around as if on a pivot, to avoid the sweeping blows of the huge battle-ax.

But every blow missed, threw the great knight almost out of his stirrups. The weight of the armor it was that compelled the medieval warriors to assume that stiff, artificial balance-seat that has descended to the present day in European cavalry soldiers. Once thrown out of balance, Ernstein was compelled to clutch at the pommel and recover himself.

At every such moment the active emperor wheeled his horse so as to come upon his adversary's *left rear*, the weak point of the horseman, and especially of Sir Wolfgang, blinded on the left side.

The keen *estoc* or thrusting-sword was directed there to the points of the armor, and again and again did it drink his blood, the emperor escaping the return blow of the ax as if by a miracle.

Once he took it on his shield, and paid dear for it. The heavy ax clove the heart-shaped plate into halves, and bruised his arm through the steel gauntlet so that it hung useless by his side for the rest of the battle.

But the drain of blood on the giant frame of Ernstein began to tell. Five times did the white charger gain his rear, and five times did the short *estoc* draw blood, the last time going deep in behind the shoulder.

Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein swayed in his saddle, and dropped his battle-ax. The blood poured out in a red tide from his last wound, and he dropped over his saddle-bow, hung there a moment, and finally fell to the earth, with a crash of armor, where he lay still.

Then the emperor waved his sword in the air.

"Long live Rudolph of Hapsburg! Death to robbers!" shouted the crowd of soldiers, and the emperor turned to the castle.

"Open your gates, knaves," he cried; "Rudolph of Hapsburg orders it."

But no sooner was the robber knight fallen, than a great shout of fury went up from the castle. Up went the drawbridge in a moment, and down rattled the portcullis, while a shower of arrows and cross-bow bolts came hailing down around the emperor.

In another moment he was down, horse and all, the noble beast transfixed by a dozen arrows, while its master's armor of proof alone saved him from a similar fate.

"Back, Bertha!" cried Rudolph, eagerly, as he writhed out from the body of his fallen steed; "I expected this. Sound trumpets!" he shouted, waving his sword, while father Francis and the empress galloped off in terror; "To the assault! Ladders and rams at once!"

Out of the woods came running men with long ladders, while others lugged up the trunk of a tree for a battering-ram. But the arrows and bolts flew faster than ever from the loop-holes of the *hourdes* along the crest of the curtains, and huge stones were tumbled down on the heads of the men who tried to plant the ladders. The trumpets sounded the assault, and the men rushed forward to batter at the drawbridge, and yet nothing was done.

But all of a sudden, from within the castle, came wild shouts and the clash of arms. The flights of arrows from the front ceased entirely, and the defenders forsook the *hourdes*, while the sound of fighting inside increased every moment.

A huge scaling-ladder was brought forward, and rested on the sill of the memorable lattice over the portcullis. Rudolph himself was the first man to rush to the assault and mount the ladder. When the soldiers followed him they found the front of the castle deserted, and a fierce fight going on in the donjon.

"Down with the drawbridge! Up with the portcullis!" cried the emperor, and in three minutes more a broad column of men-at-arms, ax in hand, went over the bridge and into the donjon hall, where they arrived in time to rescue their overmatched brethren of the amboise.

Taken in front and rear, the robbers fought desperately, but it was of no avail. They were assailed by three times their numbers, and began to throw down their arms and beg for quarter.

Little was given till the emperor himself

commanded it, and then the prisoners were brought out to the green meadows outside.

A great white tent was quickly spread on the turf, with the banner of the Crossicorde waving above it.

A seat was erected for the emperor, who doffed his helmet for the first time. Then Sir Wolfgang of Ernstein in full armor, deadly pale from loss of blood, was brought before the throne, and beheld his wronged ward, Bertha, beside her bridegroom, the emperor, while beside himself stood his friend and co-robber, Ritterschloss.

The robber knight was also in full armor, and unbound, but his head hung down on his breast, and he seemed overcome with shame and fear.

Then Sir Wolfgang saw the twelve knights of the Crossicorde stalk forward and take their places on each side of the throne, grim and silent, leaning on their swords.

It was the emperor himself who addressed the two robber knights, sternly and reprovingly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE END.

"CONRAD, Baron of Ritterschloss," said the emperor, "you are accused of having broken your vow of knighthood and become a common robber and murderer; of having given the holy honors of knighthood to this man here, knowing him to be unworthy of them, a traitor and a murderer. What have you to say to the charge?"

"Guilty, most noble emperor," said Ritterschloss, gloomily; "I knighted him, and he has been a disgrace even to us Robber Knights ever since. Do with me as you will."

"It is well," said the emperor; "confession has saved thy life, but thy crimes have forfeited thy lands and honors. We will judge thee presently."

He turned round to Wolfgang and addressed him, with deep scorn and loathing hardly concealed in his voice.

"Wolfgang Buttel, the butcher's son," said Rudolph, "as for thee, thy crimes are the deepest in the Rhineland. Thou wast the trusted friend of Sir Rudolph von Falkenstein, who made thee, a boor, his squire. But he knew too well that such as thou, with the one virtue of courage, was not fit for the holy order of knighthood. And thou, to revenge thyself, didst sell the castle to the Rhine league of thieves, who murdered thy master by thy connivance. And then thou didst seize the house of the fatherless and widow, and drive the poor mother to death, to keep the orphan a prisoner. Thou hadst not one of the virtues of a knight, and wast a crying disgrace to its order. For hospitality, generosity, modesty, courtesy, kindness to the suffering, humility to God and His priests, chastity and patience, are the vows of a knight. And of all these thou hadst not one. What hast thou to say why thou shouldst not be degraded from knighthood, and hung for a common robber?"

Sir Wolfgang made but one answer. With a hoarse laugh of defiance he spat at the emperor's robe. Rudolph did not seem even to notice the insult. He merely turned round.

"The executioner and his men," he said briefly.

A stalwart man in red, bare-armed and bare-legged, with four assistants, came forward.

"Degrade them," said Rudolph, indicating the two knights with his finger.

Sir Wolfgang was seized and unarmed in a twinkling by the executioner's men. As each piece came off, the man dealt it a blow with the enormous hammer he carried, and cried:

"So perish the arms of a false knight!"

At last it came to the gold spurs, the distinguishing mark of knighthood.

The executioner took a butcher's cleaver, and hacked off the spurs, crying:

"Knight and gentleman no more shalt thou be. Churl, serf, villain and peasant art thou to be henceforth, only fit to be hung."

Then the degraded Wolfgang was seized and pinioned, still silent and sullen, and carried off to the oak tree in front of the castle gate, where they hung him.

The baron of Ritterschloss was also degraded from the rank of knight with every mark of ignominy, his property confiscated, and himself beaten with rods and sent to prison. The rough justice of the middle ages was severe in its treatment, and Rudolph inflicted a heavy lesson on the robber knights of the Rhine that day which they never forgot.

He proceeded on his course down the river, summoning every castle to surrender, and pun-

ishing the worst cases with the same severity. The robber knights, taken one by one in the league, feared to resist the power of the league of truth and justice, banded together under the banner of the Crossicorde.

Sweet little Bertha, no longer troubled with mystery, was full of childish awe and delight at the strange fortune that had made her empress of Germany. She adored her husband, and became the mother of that powerful house of Hapsburg that has ever since been so powerful in Europe.

Max Stoffler caught Red Max poaching in the Margrave's woods, and shot him dead to his own satisfaction.

"It's bad enough to have a wicked namesake," said the ranger to his wife; "but a red-headed villain I despise."

Peter the Killer was hung at the same time with his master.

Old True-tongue recovered from the loss of his comrade, and lived to a good old age, when Lorenz, the page, was a young knight, telling everywhere how he helped the emperor to fool his enemies and win a bride from the FALCON'S NEST.

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